EXCLUSIVE:
Is the future of the JRPG riding on the shoulders of **Final Fantasy XIII**?

EXPOSED:
Developers discuss how **Facebook** became the biggest thing in gaming

ILLUSIVE:
How Martin Sheen's Illusive Man drives the story of **Mass Effect 2**

GAMEPRO

#258

MEDAL OF HONOR REDUX

ELECTRONIC ARTS' **GREG GOODRICH** AND **RICH FARRELLY** INTRODUCE US TO A TRIO OF REAL **"TIER 1 OPERATORS"** AND SHOW US HOW THEY'RE REBOOTING THE MEDAL OF HONOR FRANCHISE IN **21ST-CENTURY AFGHANISTAN**

Issue #258 // MARCH 2010

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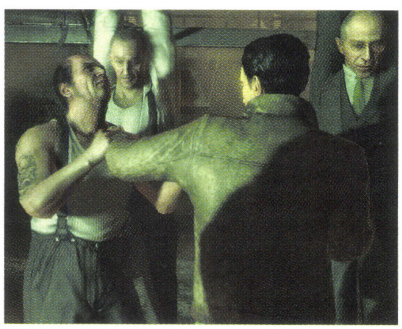

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GLORIOUS BASTARDS

Every now and then, the circumstances under which a story comes together seem almost too weird to be taken seriously. Consider our Medal of Honor cover story. Before visiting Electronic Arts' Los Angeles studio last November, we were presented with a comprehensive list of rules concerning what could and couldn't be said to the "Tier 1" military consultants we would be meeting. Upon arriving at the studio, we were further informed that it wouldn't be enough to simply promise to behave appropriately in their presence—we wouldn't even be allowed to see their faces when we interviewed them. Nor would we be able to take photos, capture video, or record their voices. Initially, we were informed that they would be hidden behind a screen when speaking to us, but we eventually learned that they would be wearing hoods, or balaclavas as it turned out, because it was "important that we be able to look them in the eye."

Their comments, which are in the cover story beginning on page 56, are certainly enthralling, but the circumstances under which they were given were so secretive and bizarre that recounting them to others usually provokes an incredulous response. "They are totally messing with you," laughed my wife when I returned home from the interview and explained how weird my day had been.

The fact that a Google search of "Tier 1 Operators" yields very little in the way of useable information adds fuel to the doubt, as does the reluctance to comment we encountered from the various military sources we turned to for verification. "There's a lot of information out there, if you know where to look," said Medal of Honor Executive Producer Greg Goodrich when I quizzed him on the subject, and it turns out he was right. Poking around some JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) resources online, we found some fascinating information that certainly explains the secrecy and the earnestness we observed when speaking with these men. They are, it must be said, formidable men, and that they're choosing to shed some light on their lives by working with a video-game company rather than using more traditional media speaks volumes about the regard that games are now held. G

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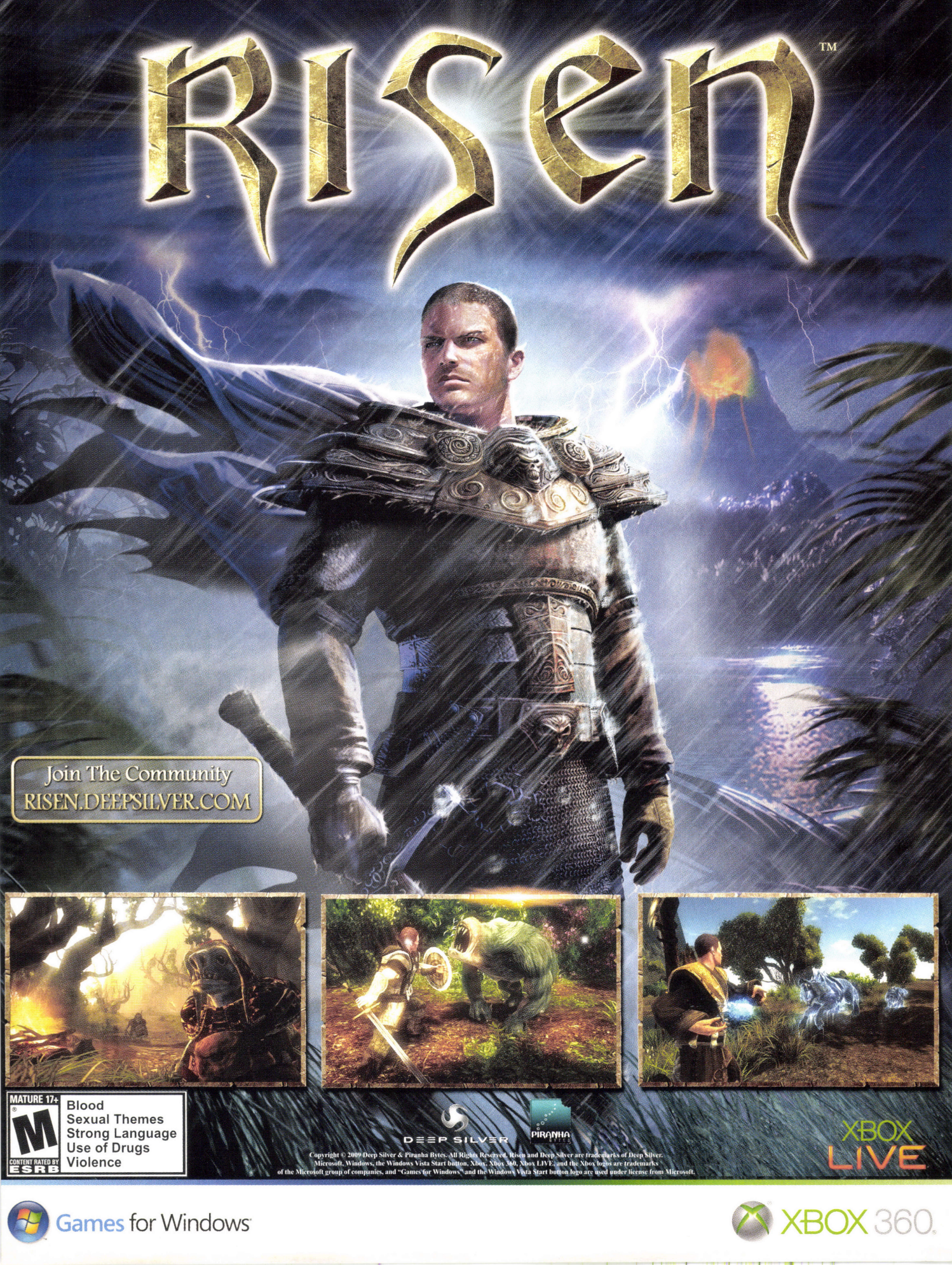
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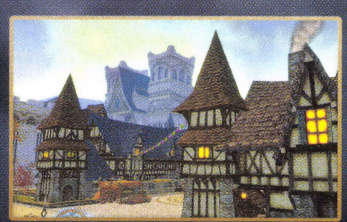

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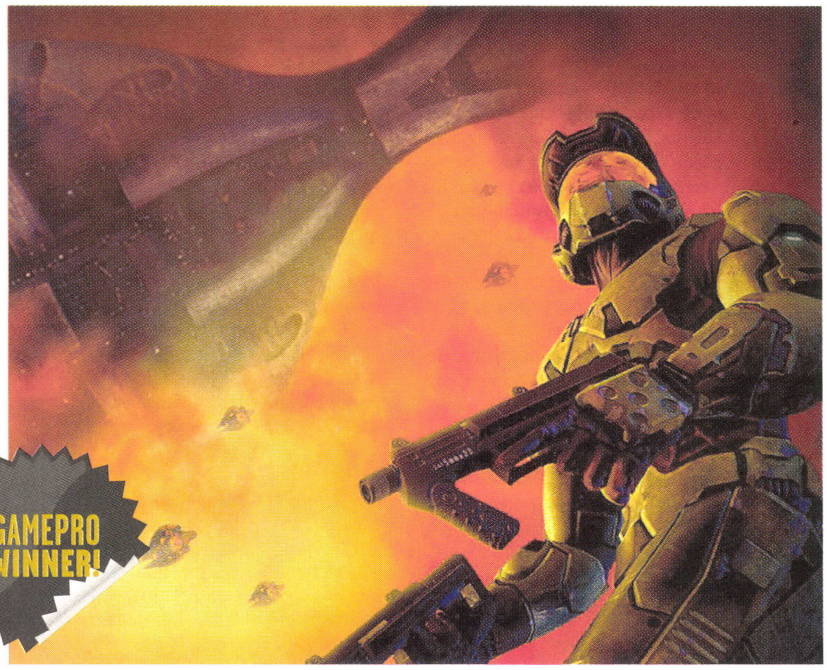
March Letter *of the* Month



Halo Outreach ★★★

Dear GamePro,

Could you guys help me with a problem? I'm a 13-year-old gamer, and my favorite video games are the Halo trilogy. The problem is Halo has a Mature rating. My parents don't let me get anything with an M rating. In some cases, I understand their reasoning. My parents don't allow me to play games like MadWorld or Army of Two. But Halo is different—it isn't as graphically violent, and it doesn't have strong language. The violence is similar to a PG-13 movie. I think Halo should have a Teen rating. My parents clearly don't grasp this. I even told them that GamePro wrote an article that said Halo should have a Teen rating. I show maturity and responsibility throughout the day. I have even saved my allowance money to buy Halo 2 on PC (I don't own an Xbox 360). If you can please tell my parents that Halo should have a Teen rating, I would be very happy. ***Andrew Longon—Lafayette, LA***

At the risk of sounding preachy, pigeonholing games based on their ratings is ridiculous. The idea that all M-rated games are the same is like saying all gamers are bald 40-year-old men who live in their parents' basements. Although some gamers may share similar qualities, that's a stereotype. Halo isn't excessively bloody and has little gore. It's like Gears of War for kiddies. Parents should shield their children from mature material based on firsthand research or experience, not just ratings. ***—Heather Bartron***

All Too Easy, Part 2

Dear GamePro,

In the December 2009 issue (#255), all of the editorial assistants shared what they thought is the hardest game around (I'm disappointed with McKinley's answer of Harvest Moon: Friends of Mineral Town). What's the easiest game you've ever played or beaten? Mine is Pokémon Platinum. ***John Nicol—via e-mail***

The strange thing about difficulty in video games is that we tend to remember the games that cause us to grit our teeth for hours and hours or chuck controllers. But when a game doesn't present too much of a challenge, it doesn't leave much of an impression. While I'm sure easier titles exist, I'm going with PaRappa the Rapper 2 for the PS2. While I was an enormous fan of Sony's rapping pooch—I still have the orange beanie to prove it—my mastery of PaRappa's original outing took a toll on my enjoyment of the sequel. Don't get me wrong—I still memorized every song, pattern, and cardboard-cutout dance move in his arsenal. But the effect of PaRappa's underdog plight was all but lost with the sequel's simplistic Simon Says controls and songs that just didn't match up with the original tunes. ***—Will Herring***

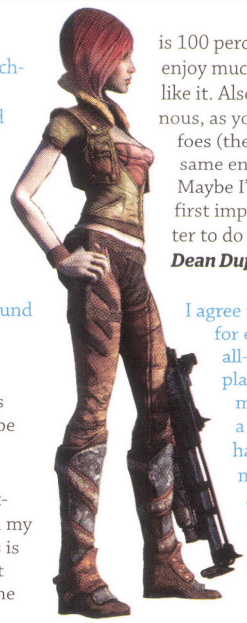
Alright, alright, Mr. Touchy—I'll give you a straight answer this time. For me, the easiest game I've ever played is Star Fox: Assault. I'm not saying that it isn't a great part of the Star Fox series, but the enemies practically bleed Shield Energy boosts and Nova Bombs. I didn't get hit once during my first playthrough. ***—McKinley Noble***

e-mail letters, comments, and ideas to feedback@gamepro.com

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

> "Borderlands isn't Call of Duty. It's more like going hunting with your pals instead of playing paintball."

The easiest and most entertaining game I've played by far is The Munchables. The game surprised me in many ways. I never thought I'd find myself saying I actually enjoyed the game. And even though it's easily the simplest game I've ever played, I love it to death. If you own a Wii, you should give it a spin. The Munchables is like Katamari Damacy, but instead of rolling up junk, you're romping around as a cute animal eating junk. ***–HB***



Borderlands Bites

I regretfully purchased Borderlands hoping that the PVP aspect would be like Call of Duty 4's Team Deathmatch. I guess I should've learned more about it instead of just accepting all of the positive remarks from my friends. In my opinion Borderlands is a combination of World of Warcraft and a first-person shooter. The game is 100 percent quest-based, which I didn't enjoy much. I understand why others may like it. Also, the game seems really monotonous, as you're killing one of the few same foes (the Skags). They're basically the same enemy—they just change in size. Maybe I'm just ranting, but these are my first impressions. I also have nothing better to do at work than to write GamePro.

Dean Duprey–via e-mail

I agree that Borderlands isn't a game for everyone. It's become one of my all-time favorites. It's basically multiplayer Fallout. My first impressions mirrored yours; I wasn't expecting a quest-based game and found it hard to push on. But as I spent more time playing Borderlands, I couldn't put it down. Absolutely nothing compares to sniping an enemy with a rifle that fires corrosive ordinance that melts faces. One of my favorite things about Borderlands is dueling McKinley with my Siren and hearing the little-girl screams echoing from my TV as I blast him straight to hell with a shotgun. ***–HB***

"They're basically the same enemy—they just change in size?" Dean—may I call you Double D?—I actually like that the enemies get bigger and badder. If you keep playing the game, I guarantee that you'll have your hands full with the hilarious bosses, tough-as-nails Crimson Lance soldiers (which are really hard to kill), and the occasional super-sized Rakk. Besides, Borderlands isn't Call of Duty. It's more like going hunting with your pals instead of playing paintball. I dig Borderlands—even if Heather's constantly killing me and stealing all of the best loot. ***–MN***

User Reviews:

New Super Mario Brothers Wii *by LizardKing627*

New Super Mario Bros. Wii's new power-ups and levels are awesome. It reminds me of all the fun I had firing up Super Mario World for the first time. This game even has all the fun little secrets and challenges in the levels, too. It truly is old school meets new school. Think of the greatness of Super Mario World mixing with the Wii. The product is a Super Mario Bros. game that I've been waiting for a long time. I wish it had more content, though...more levels, more power-ups. The game's still awesome, though—a must-have for Wii owners. ★★★★★

Tekken 6 (PS3, Xbox 360) *by mcdavid6189*

I *love* the new animations that Namco Bandai added to characters' existing moves. If you thought the 100-plus moves some characters had were a little similar, the developers did a lot to solve that issue. I play Marshall Law and Lei Wu Long a lot, and the developer didn't disappoint in adding new moves that greatly improve strategies. Always thought Lei didn't have a smooth transition from a crouch? Lei now has plenty of new ways of getting up and hurting the opponent. I don't want to reveal much, but for hardcore fighting fans, this game is the best 3D fighter. They made the characters move smoother in three dimensions; they feel less limited in the ring. It's such a treat to examine a slow-motion replay of a new animation to better understand how the character executes an old move in a new way. Namco Bandai put a lot of thought into this game, and I love it. ★★★★★

Go for the Go?

Dear GamePro,
I had my old PSP-3000 hacked (or homebrewed) so I could download all of my games to my memory card. I broke my old PSP, but I still have all of my games backed up on my computer. I would like to buy the PSP Go, but I don't know if the new PSP can play my ISO-file games. Please tell me what's the file format of the new games and which PSP option is better—the 3000 or the Go?

Gizmo Lucero–via e-mail

Professionally, I can't comment on the PSP Go's homebrew compatibility (and I also can't tell you to Google search the subject. *wink, wink*). In my opinion, the PSP Go is undoubtedly a sexy device that I would buy in a heartbeat, and the digital interface is pretty cool—but the $250 price and lack of an UMD drive doesn't sit well with me. I need to finish Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII and Tekken 6, and my PSP 3000 is chugging along just fine. My advice? Stick with the PSP 3000 if you're short on cash, since Sony continues to support UMD (for now). ***–MN***

Halo Overload

Why are there so many Halo games? The first three are good, but then Ensemble made a real-time-strategy Halo game (and it has a Teen rating!). Halo is a shooter, so what convinced Microsoft that it could be a RTS? And then we've got Halo 3: ODST. It's a shooter, but you don't play as Master Chief. That's lame. And now Halo Reach.... When will Halo end? The series is really turning to crap!

Matt Voigt–via e-mail

Millions of gamers would disagree with you, Matt. While I agree that the first few Halos are absolutely great, it only makes sense for Bungie and Microsoft to expand the Halo

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“Halo is a shooter, so what convinced Microsoft that it could be a RTS?”

franchise. Think of it this way: While we all love Master Chief, Halo has many other interesting characters, worlds, and stories, even if fans of the series may not agree with how they tell those tales. Imagine if BioWare had never taken on Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic or if Maxis didn't expand the SimCity franchise with The Sims. Bungie may someday revisit Master Chief's story, and we have a feeling that if they do, it could be special. **–WH**

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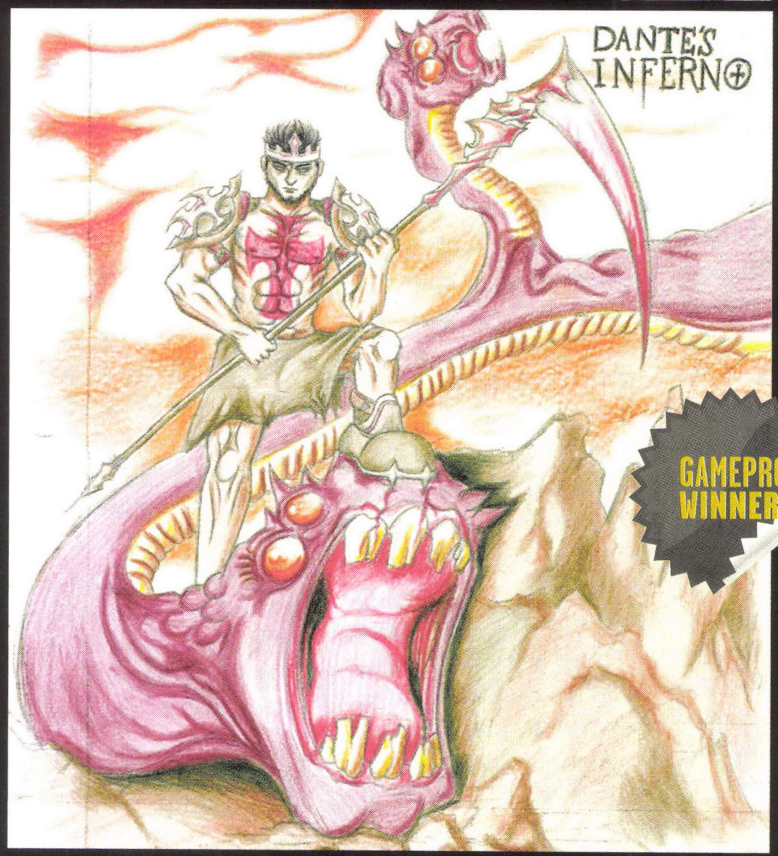

Cody Phillips

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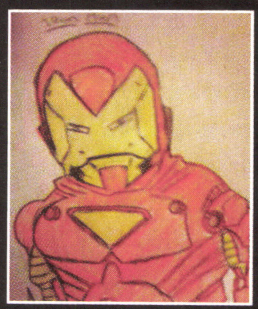

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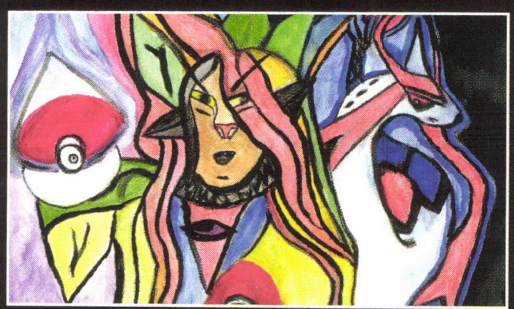

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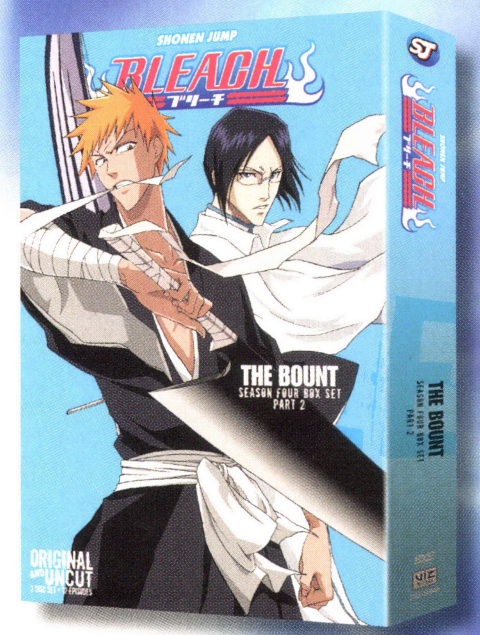

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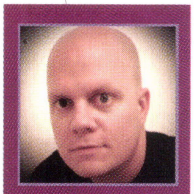

JOE RYBICKI

Plastic Axe

Bruised egos and bulging wallets.

Rock stars, generally speaking, tend to have fairly large egos. It's practically part of the job description. So perhaps it was inevitable that music games would be the stage for some good old-fashioned tabloid drama.

That's what happened when Guitar Hero 5 came out in 2009. Activision included the likeness of the late Kurt Cobain (of Nirvana—perhaps you've heard of them?) in the game. That would've been fine, but it became an issue because players could use him in any song. So once the game came out, players started posting YouTube videos of Cobain singing enthusiastically along to songs such as Public Enemy's "Bring the Noise" and Bon Jovi's "You Give Love a Bad Name."

This didn't sit well with Cobain's widow, Courtney Love, who fired off a series of barely coherent—but clearly furious—Twitter posts on the matter. Her implication appeared to be that Activision used Cobain's likeness in a way his estate never approved, prompting Love to threaten to "sue the s*** out of Activision." Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic followed with similar (though more carefully worded) disappointment in a joint statement, saying, "We urge Activision to do the right thing in 're-locking' Kurt's character so that this won't continue in the future."

So far, Love's complaints haven't evolved into actual legal action. But just a couple of months later, things got ugly for Activision again. In early November, ska-pop band No Doubt expressed outrage about almost exactly the same issue: The band members are all unlockable characters in Band Hero, and as selectable characters players can use them to sing other artists' songs.

Only No Doubt isn't content with venting to fans and threatening lawsuits; they actually filed one, alleging that the game "turned the group into virtual karaoke players." The suit seeks, among other things, unspecified damages, a temporary restraining order, and the recall of existing copies of the game. As of this writing, Activision has responded with a countersuit, seeking damages of their own due to No Doubt's alleged refusal to support the game with promotional interviews, appearances, and such.

"VARIETY CLAIMS THAT THE PRESENCE OF A SONG IN A GUITAR HERO GAME CAN INCREASE THAT SONG'S SALES BY AN AVERAGE OF 300 PERCENT."

In other words, it's a mess.

This sort of thing has prompted many music fans to speculate that bands would boycott Activision's games in the future, or at the very least they would refuse to allow the publisher to use their likenesses in the game—or even in any game. But I've got news for you, folks: That ain't gonna happen.

Oh, sure, artists under consideration for appearances in future music games will doubtless set stricter parameters on how gamemakers may use their likenesses. But boycott music games, or even just Activision games, altogether? I repeat: It's not gonna happen.

Here's why: Appearances in music games are good for musicians. I mean, really good. A recent article in *Variety* claimed that the presence of a single song in a Guitar Hero game can increase that song's sales elsewhere by an average of 300 percent; the article also claimed that sales of Aerosmith's entire catalog went up by 40 percent following the release of Guitar Hero: Aerosmith.

The *New York Times* reported similarly positive numbers, pointing out that after The Who released 12 tracks for download in Rock Band, sales of those tracks increased by 159 percent. And apparently, after showing up in Guitar Hero III, Weezer's "My Name Is Jonas" saw sales jump 1,000 percent. And Activision's own Guitar Hero, CEO Dan Rosensweig, has said that the 81 artists featured in World Tour saw catalog sales increase by an average of 50 percent. These are sales of the bands' entire catalogs, not just the songs in the game.

A musician friend of mine said the "halo effect" from music-game appearances is something like what happens when a band releases a greatest-hits compilation: People buy the anthology, hear a few songs they particularly like, and then buy the original album those songs are from.

The bottom line: Appearing in a music game translates to big bucks across the board, from album sales to merchandise to concert tickets. And that's in addition to whatever licensing fees the bands may get for the use of their song in the first place.

So, no, bands aren't likely to start backing away from music games anytime soon. More and more artists are beginning to realize that these games are a legitimate and powerful music-delivery system, one that forges attachments between the player and the artists that are far stronger than what comes from more passive media.

Will bands take a closer look at their contracts in the future? You bet your sweet ass they will. But in the end, they'll sign. They know they'd be foolish not to.

—Joe Rybicki

Joe Rybicki is a freelance writer who spent the last 13 years covering the video game industry. He currently runs Plastic Axe, a blog about music games. Visit him at www.plasticaxe.com and follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/plasticaxe

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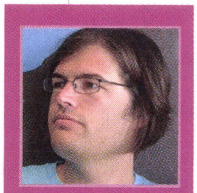

ROBERT ASHLEY

A Life Well Wasted

I desire to hear about the people of gaming as much as the products.

A good portion of my professional life once consisted of traveling around the world to visit game studios and write about their wares. Racking up frequent flyer miles on international flights is supposed to make you feel successful and important, but to me, it often felt like a wasted opportunity. I flew to Shanghai, where I sang karaoke with an American sound designer who could rap in perfect Mandarin. I flew to the Ukraine, where I interviewed game developers who grew up miles away from the nuclear fallout of Chernobyl. I flew to Poland to cover a role-playing game, only to end up touring Auschwitz with the game's publicist. I traveled to many places, and I met many people. I listened to their stories, and I got to know them.

But when I came back to the States, I set everything human aside and wrote about the screen. What are the game modes? How do you play it? What kind of guns can you shoot? Even when I tried to incorporate some of the human stories I'd found along the way, they were only window dressing for mundane game geekery.

At the time, the general assumption was that game-magazine readers were in it for the information. They wanted nitty-gritty details about games coming down the pipe, and that was it. But gaming isn't just pixels and polygons. It isn't just something that happens on a screen. Gaming is the people who play games, the people who make games, the people who meet their wives and husbands playing games online, the people who ruin their lives playing games online; the people who love games more than anything, and the people for whom gaming is a plague.

"WHAT I REALLY WANT OUT OF A STORY IS A CONNECTION TO A PERSON, A WINDOW INTO A LIFE THAT'S NOT MY OWN."

Gaming is Kelly, a cosplayer from San Jose, California, who likes nothing better than to spend a hundred hours designing and sewing a game-character costume. I sat in her apartment with the lights off (it was dark because she suffers from a neurological disorder that makes bright light nauseating) and listened to her reminisce about the days when she could stay up all night making costumes.

Gaming is Mike Mika, a veteran programmer who keeps the game-collection equivalent of the Library of Congress in his basement. He told me about learning to program on an Atari computer in the electronics section of Kmart while on frequent shopping trips with his mother.

Gaming is Matthew Shafeek, an improv actor who decided to give up video games for a year to get more done. He told me that the hardest thing about giving up games was not being able to come home from work and unwind.

Gaming is Steve Ritchie, the best-selling pinball-machine designer of all time, now unemployed and selling his memorabilia to pay the bills. He told me that he should have exited the pinball industry before it collapsed, but he just loved making pinball machines too much to do so.

Games are a part of our lives, not just an escape from them. The stories that I want to read—and the stories that I want to tell—are about those lives. My main gig these days is creating an irregularly released podcast called *A Life Well Wasted*. The show's tagline is "Video games and the people who love them." I met all of the people listed here and recorded their stories for the show. The process changed my view of what gaming media can be.

Gamers are always looking to legitimize their passion for games. We want the non-gaming world to understand what we're into—that it's not mindless, artless, brain-rotting trash (or all of it isn't, at least). Our focus has always been on the games: We need different games, better games, grown-up games, artsy games, blockbuster games. What we really need is to communicate to the rest of the world what is universal and human about our slice of the culture.

It's fine to want to know the details about some cool-looking game. I waste hours sifting through blogs for little tidbits to satiate my game lust. But what I really want out of a story—whether it's about games, sports, politics, or any other subject—is a connection to a person, a window into a life that's not my own. And really, that's not unlike what I love about a good game.

—Robert Ashley

Robert Ashley is a freelance journalist and aspiring radio producer. He produces the highly respected podcast A Life Well Wasted, an Internet radio show about video games and the people who love them. He is also a musician.

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JOHN RICCIARDI

Japan is Dead. Long Live Japan

Rumors of Japan's demise have been...marginally exaggerated.

"**Japan** is doomed." It's a phrase you often hear and read these days among so-called industry analysts and members of the gaming media. After years of spearheading innovation in game design and technology, Japanese game developers have fallen too far behind the curve, they say—dooming themselves to irrelevance while their Western peers continue to evolve and flourish.

It's an easy argument to make; just look at the sales charts from recent years. In the past the top-selling games in North America almost always came from Japanese publishers like Square Enix, Konami, and Capcom. But over the last few years, the pendulum has swung toward the West, and most of the big sellers are homegrown hits from companies like Activision, EA, and Ubisoft. These aren't unfounded criticisms— for the most part, developers in the East have indeed been struggling to keep up with the times. Just look at any major Japanese game's online functionality—or relative lack thereof—for evidence that their developers have a fundamental lack of understanding of what makes modern games tick. Remember how ridiculously complicated it was to get online with Metal Gear Solid 4: Guns of the Patriots? One game-specific ID is bad enough, but two? Or how about games designed for cooperative online play that lack voice chat? Sure, Japanese players may not prefer it, but Japan's not the only place in the world. Outside-the-box thinking—which in this case means thinking more seriously about overseas markets—is a must.

Plenty of other problems exist in Eastern gamemaking, such as outdated development methods and relative lack of technical know-how compared to the West, poor communication and sharing of information between teams that exist under the same umbrella, and a stubborn unwillingness to take risks and try new things. These are solvable problems, and contrary to popular thought, Japan's game designers are starting to listen. Working at 8-4 here in Tokyo, I'm in a unique position to witness this little renaissance firsthand. We have relationships with virtually every major and minor developer in the industry here, and we often discuss these issues with them at great length. (We're known first and foremost as a localization company, but one of our other main goals is to educate Eastern developers about the West and to foster communication between the two sides.)

"MORE DEVELOPERS IN JAPAN HAVE BEGUN TO ACKNOWLEDGE THE IMPORTANCE OF THE WEST AND PAY CLOSER ATTENTION TO WESTERN GAMES."

The encouraging thing we've found is that in the last year or so, more developers in Japan have begun to acknowledge the importance of the West and pay closer attention to Western games, which is undoubtedly the first step toward reversing the current downward trend of Japanese games. It's not as if the situation is going to suddenly change overnight, but the wheels have definitely begun turning.

And for all they have to learn, Eastern developers do some things better than their Western counterparts. The art direction and sound production of Japanese games is unparalleled; it's a wonder more American and European developers haven't collaborated with artists and composers from Japan. And the attention to detail applied to every aspect of Japanese game design is second-to-none. Regardless of where you fall in the West vs. East role-playing-game debate, you can't deny that BioWare's menu and interface designers could learn a thing or two from their friends at Square Enix. The quirky, it-had-to-have-been-conceived-in-Japan gems constantly redefine what we've come to expect from our gaming experiences, like Katamari Damacy, Patapon, and Half-Minute Hero. And let's not forget Nintendo, who still seems to sell a gazillion copies of just about everything they make. They seem to be doing a pretty good job, last I checked.

Japan's gaming scene has definitely seen better days, but don't be fooled into thinking the end is nigh. The next time someone tells you as much, whip out your copy of Yakuza 3 and cross-chop them in the...no, don't do that. Just rest assured that as more Japanese developers learn about the West, the situation will continue to improve. And we'll be here in Tokyo doing our part to support the cause.

John Ricciardi lives and works in Japan, where he helps run 8-4, the game-localization company that holds the record for most ESRB descriptors for a Nintendo-published title. Follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/johntv.

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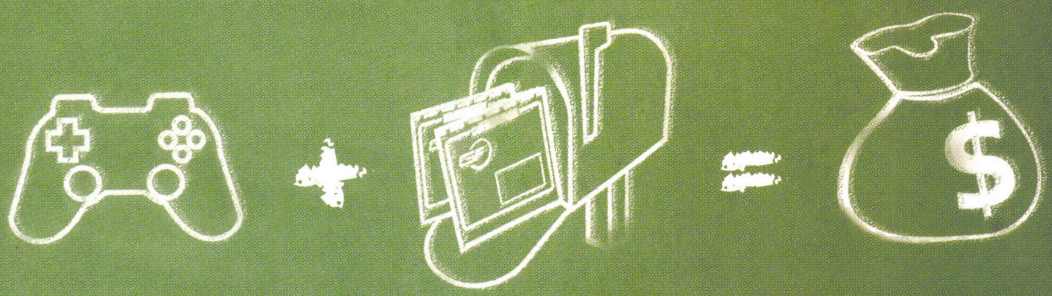

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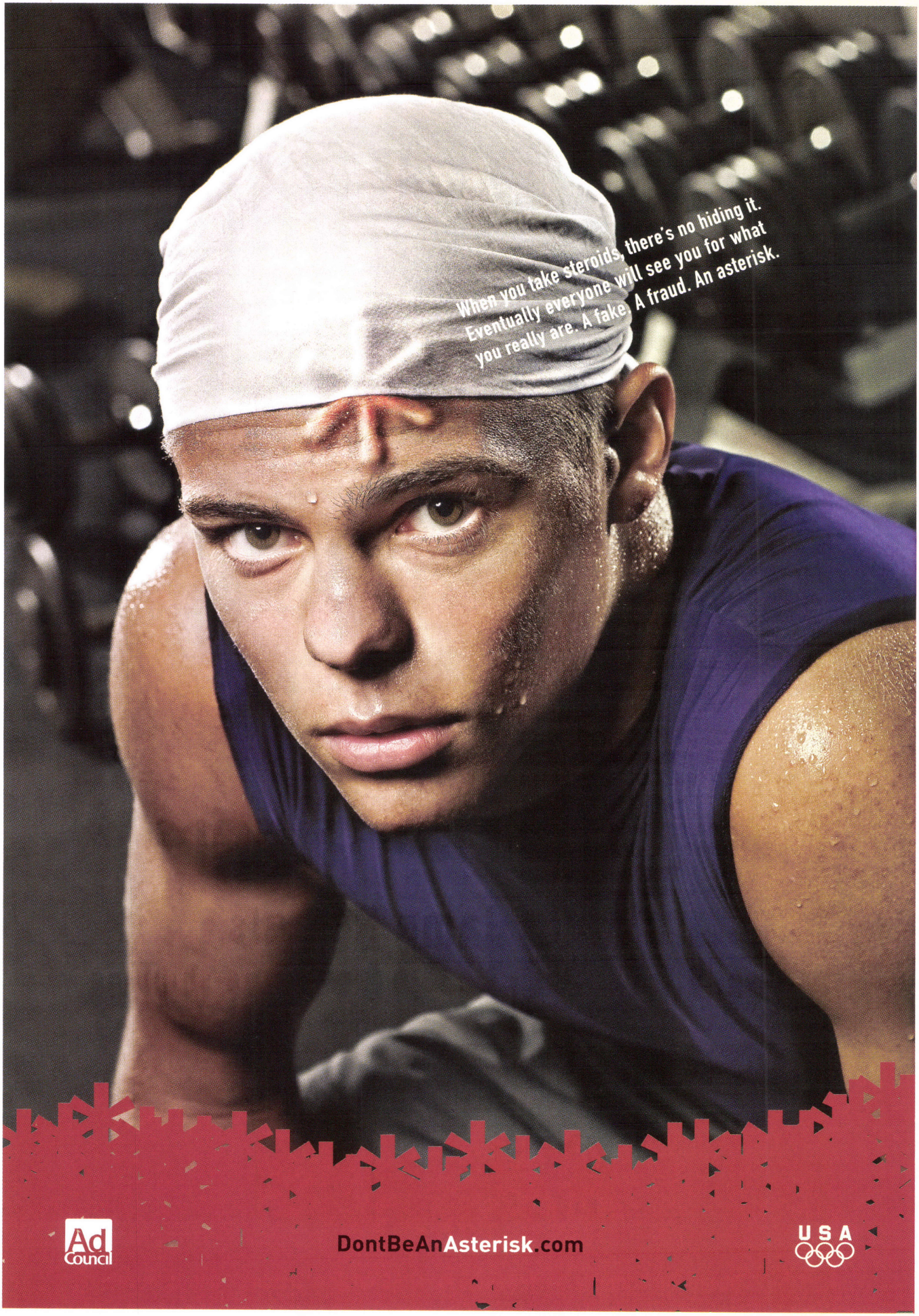
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Spawn pt.

SUPER MEAT BOY

Cheeseburger Boy

THIS SLAB OF RETRO INDIE MEAT IS WELL DONE.

Some Tetris addicts see visions of falling blocks when they go to bed. Many gamers dream of fret-board runways undulating with multicolored Guitar Hero notes. Lately, when I close my eyes, I see a boy made of dripping, bloody meat, carved up repeatedly by a twisted cornucopia of whirling blades. ▶▶▶

Developer: Team Meat // Publisher: Nintendo // Release Date: Q1 2010

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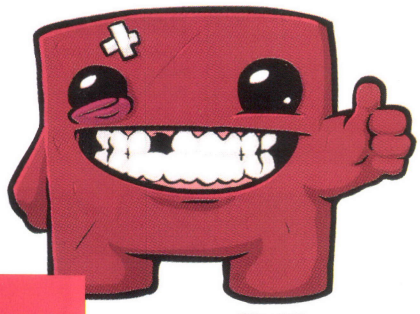
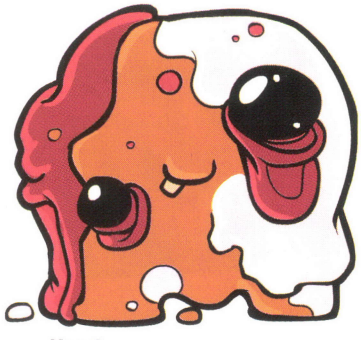
SPAWN POINT



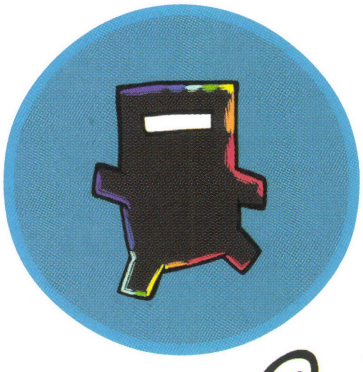
Meat Boy

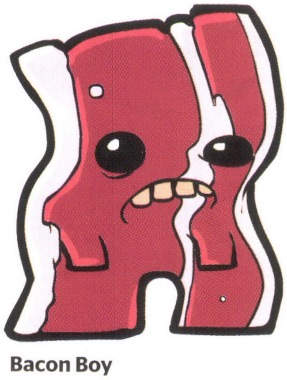
"It's like playing Super Mario Bros. viewed through a *Hellraiser* filter."

Meatloaf Boy

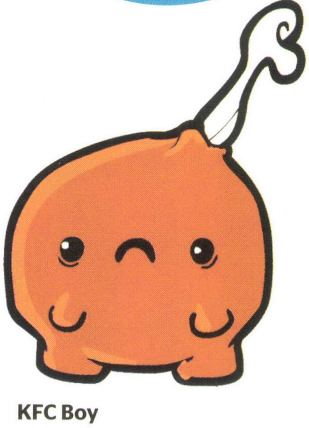


Head Cheese Boy





Bacon Boy



KFC Boy

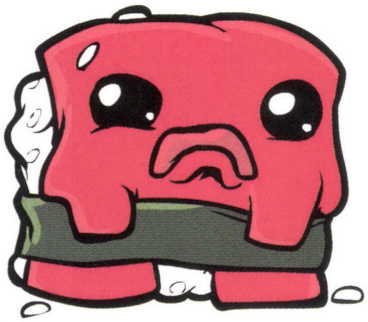
Judging by the sheer sadistic depravity poured into the level designs found in the first world of the upcoming indie platformer Super Meat Boy, the members of Team Meat have a buzz-saw fetish. After spending a few days flinging my diminutive meaty body against deadly spinning cutlery while trying to save a girl made out of bandages from an evil fetus in a jar, I might have one, too.

Indie Game Designer Edmund McMillen and Programmer Tommy Refenes grew up on a steady diet of classic games on the Atari, NES, and other early home consoles. Their love and appreciation for gaming's roots frequently pops up in Super Meat Boy's design. The tight gameplay hearkens back to a simpler time in gaming when all you had to do was run, jump, and dodge your way to the end of each level. The little protagonist is reminiscent of the heroic Mario—only with his flesh stripped clean from his body. As Meat Boy gleefully bounds his way through each überdeadly stage toward his bandage girlfriend at the opposite end, he makes gross squishy sounds and leaves a trail of gore on every surface he touches. It's like playing Super Mario Bros. viewed through a *Hellraiser* filter.

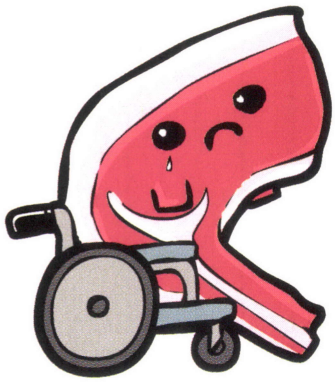
The Chopping Block

Team Meat often juxtaposes the pleasant with the gruesome. Lush greenery and cute wildlife provide a surprisingly soothing backdrop for the bloodshed that unfolds. Thanks to a few lines of simple code, Super Meat Boy features the world's most realistic squirrel and rabbit A.I. The little critters frequently make kamikaze runs toward a nearby saw blade. "I gave them a little bit of attraction to the saws and other obstacles...because it's funny," says Refenes.

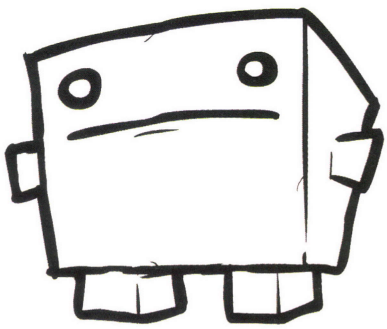
Super Meat Boy's five core worlds boast more than 250 levels, each brimming with sweet death. The forested chapter I tackled plays a lot like running naked through thorny underbrush and diving headlong into a saw mill. Hellish instruments of dismemberment designed to turn Meat Boy into lunch meat spring



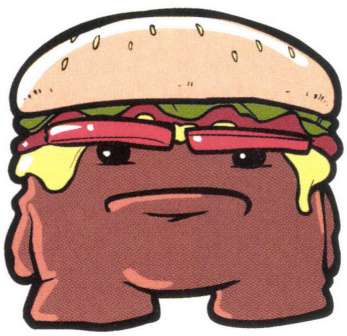
Sushi Boy



Pork Chop Boy

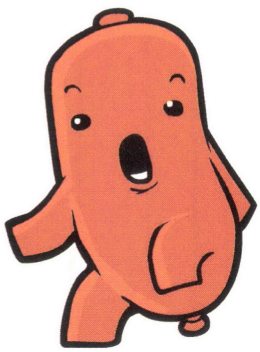


Tofu Boy



Cheeseburger Boy

"This wouldn't be until after you kill the walking chainsaw with legs by throwing squirrels into his gears."
–Edmund McMillen



Sausage Boy

from the beautiful landscape. The level designs become crazier and deadlier as you play. The designers' saw fetish extends to all saws—big saws, small saws, spinning saws, moving saws, and saws that fire at you out of nowhere. Things grow weirder from there.

After the forest, players reach the Haunted Hospital. "It's full of contaminated blood and used rusty needles—not something that's basically an open wound would want to roll around in," McMillen says. "This wouldn't be until after you kill the walking chainsaw with legs by throwing squirrels into his gears." In this hospital of horrors, Meat Boy also faces attacks from viruses. Then he visits the Salt Factory. Ouch. I can't wait to see what other sick stuff's in store for this heroic hunk of meat.

Retro Tribute

Super Meat Boy honors the old-school games Team Meat grew up playing during what McMillen calls gaming's "honeymoon" period. "You know, before she got all fat, bitchy, and money-hungry," he says. The designers sprinkled retro-design aesthetics throughout the game; hidden warp zones allow you to play special levels designed to look like they were pulled from NES, Atari, and Game Boy titles. Beating these nostalgia-inducing zones unlocks guest stars from other well-known indie games, such as Commander Video from Bit.Trip and Tim from Braid.

Death comes frequently, but unlimited lives and the over-the-top ridiculousness of the gleefully demented level design makes it easy to stick with it. The reward for your persistence is hilarious: After you beat a level, a replay lets you watch a zillion Meat Boys simultaneously charge through the stage.

The game even has an option for those who enjoy a good challenge: Super Meat Boy's ultradifficult Dark World should satiate players unsatisfied by the grisly overworld. Here you can access tougher versions of each level, packed with even more slaughtertastic goodness.

2010 is shaping up to be a good year for indie games, and Super Meat Boy is leading the charge. ***–Nathan Meunier***

INTERVIEW

MOB RULES

2K Games' director of creative production—and in-house Mafia expert, Jack Scalici—tells us how his team is making Mafia II the most realistic mob experience in gaming.

GamePro: *How does the story of the fictional main character, Vito Scaletta, mirror the lives of the real-life mob and Mafia members that you researched for the game?*
Jack Scalici: Like the story of many famous historical mobsters, Vito's is a story of rags to riches...with guns. Along the way he experiences conflict, betrayal, loss...you know, the usual ups and downs and sacrifice that come with the territory when you choose this path. And like many of his real-life counterparts, while this is all happening, Vito has a hell of a lot of fun.

GP: *What were some of the criteria your team used for hiring voice actors?*
JS: The goal, first and foremost, was to have truly believable characters. Our art team has created some terrific character models, and we wanted voices that were going to sound as unique and new to the audience as the characters they're coming from. I discussed this early on with the team, and we agreed that we wanted voices that, when you heard them, you identified them as coming from the characters you're seeing on the screen, not a celebrity. So that was the first criteria—no recognizable voices.

Another factor that affected our casting decisions was that since our characters were all supposed to be real people, every major character had to be voiced by an actor who isn't too far away from the character they're playing. When you're dealing with aliens and cyborg space marines, you just need a cool-sounding voice. When you're dealing with characters that are supposed to come across as everyday people, most of whom grew up in the neighborhoods they live in—and some of whom just happen to be wiseguys—you need to work with actors who grew up in a similar environment, who know similar characters in real life, in order to get a believable performance.

Something I paid particular attention to was the characters' accents. Empire Bay is based on New York City, which is one of the most diverse places on the planet. This being a story about the Mafia, we have the Italians and Sicilians, of course, but along with them we also have the Irish, Polish, Chinese, Jews, blacks, and regular-old white people. So we have a *lot* of characters in the game, and a big part of my job was making sure

they all speak with the right accents.

GP: *Scriptwriting is a fairly new phenomenon in gaming. Do you feel that the gap is closing between crafting stories for films and crafting tales for games?*
JS: I would say that scriptwriting is not necessarily a new phenomenon in the gaming space; it's just that the task is no longer falling to a designer or a producer, and a lot of that has to do with the fact that the scripts are much, much larger now.

Games have had stories and scripts, no matter how basic, since the early days, and someone had to write that stuff. The main difference I see is that today, the stories we are able to tell in a game are so vast that we need at least one full-time person dedicated to the task of scriptwriting and narrative design, and usually a lot more than one. We as gamers, developers, and publishers have come to realize that a well-structured narrative can be just as important to a game's success as the gameplay—and perhaps even more important than the gameplay in certain genres.

Nowadays, game consoles and high-end PCs, as well as game budgets, allow us to use a staggering amount of professional voice-over, motion capture, et cetera, when crafting a game's story. All of the elements that are more or less required to tell a story in a modern triple-A action game like Mafia II are the very same elements required to make a Hollywood blockbuster. Anything you put into a script, be it a movie script or a game script, can be executed within in a game.

So I think the gap you mention closed a long time ago. I can think of several games that have stories that are much better than what I am currently seeing in movie theaters. We're at the point today where our audience is all but demanding a compelling story to go along with the gameplay.

GP: *Has anything happened in your life that influenced Mafia II?*
JS: I'd be lying if I said no. Some of the characters are based on guys I know or used to know, some more loosely than others. The rather unique dialog is more or less all stuff I grew up with.

Some of the era-specific stuff in the game came from stories my grandfathers

told me. They both grew up in NYC, and if Vito Scaletta were a real person and still alive today, he'd be around their age. I'm lucky to have both of them still with me, along with both of my grandmothers. So my link to the '40s and '50s is alive and well.

Working so closely with Mafia II has also been kind of gratifying in a weird sort of way. You know when you come to that point in your life where you realize that, at least in some way, you *are* the stereotype that people have for your ethnicity and/or the place you grew up? Imagine taking all of that knowledge you assumed was next to useless and having someone ask you to help them bring it to life inside of a game.

GP: *How does the input of real-life Mafia members help add a layer of authenticity to the story?*

JS: Some of the situations that these guys get into...you can't write this stuff. You need to hear it from the guys who lived it.

I should also point out that you don't need to talk to someone who is in the Mafia to hear some very entertaining stories about the Mafia. Anyone who grew up in a neighborhood run by the mob or maybe went to school with the kids of famous mobsters...these people usually have stories like you wouldn't believe. And as you might imagine, it's also a hell of a lot easier to find such a person and get them to talk.

As a bonus, you get to hear these stories from the perspective of an outsider, a "civilian." As the overwhelming majority of our game's audience consists of people who are not in the mob, I found this to be invaluable. A lot of these stories I heard came from the actors in the game.

GP: *Does the concept of* omertà, *essentially the Mafia's "Ten Commandments," affect the gameplay? If Vito looks at the wives of his friends, one of the no-nos of mob life, does he risk punishment from his Mafia family?*

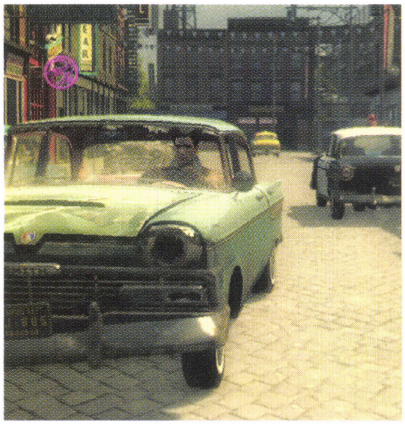
JS: We had something like that in the original design, but in our quest for authenticity, we ended up replacing the wives with floozies and prostitutes. Everyone wins.

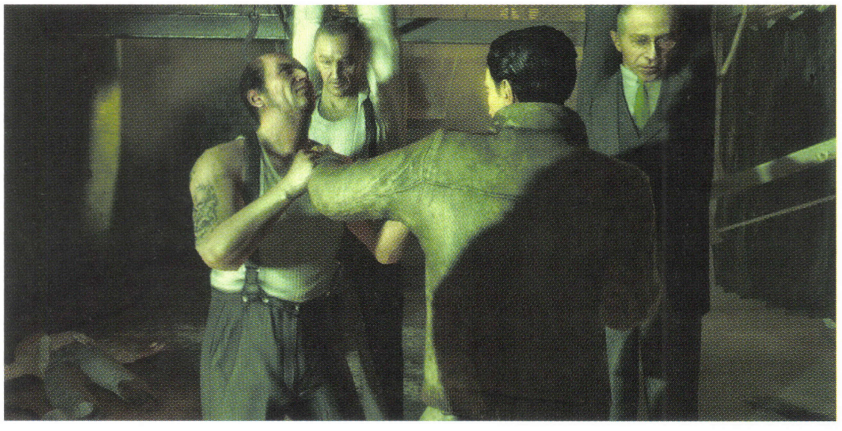
In all seriousness, we decided to focus more on what most gamers would find most gratifying. Could hitting on the wives of your criminal associates be fun? Maybe. Is awesome shooting-and-driving gameplay fun? Hell, yes. So we focused on that.

Yes, Vito and Joe get "made" in the game, but you don't necessarily need to be a made guy to live the life of a mobster. Of the main three guys in *Goodfellas*, how many were made men? Zero.

GP: *What do you think is so compelling about keeping the story in the 1940s and '50s? Did you consider giving Mafia II a modern-day setting?*

JS: From the very start, it was decided that Vito's journey was to begin when he comes back from WWII, so that pretty much dictated that the start of the game





would be in the '40s. The '40s also works nicely as a transition from the first Mafia game, which was released in 2002 and still has a loyal following to this day. And it also provides a great contrast to the 1950s.... The cars, the music, the fashion: The entire culture of these two eras feels completely different and so unique.

The '50s is a rather awesome era for Mafia II. The U.S. had just won WWII, and American culture was changing faster than ever before. Rock 'n' roll was born. Cars started going fast and looking cool. The youth started rebelling. Drug use became more widespread. All this against a backdrop of the Korean War, McCarthyism and the Red Scare, and the Cold War. This was the Golden Age of America. None of this has much to do with the Mafia, but it provides a great setting for Mafia II.

One of the nice things about keeping the story in the '40s and '50s is that there was no electronic surveillance and far less pressure from the federal government on organized crime than there is today. A wiseguy could pick up the phone and call another wiseguy and talk business. That makes it a lot easier for us to move the story along and to make sure our audience comes along for the ride. If you've ever heard modern-day wiseguys talk business, you will most likely have no idea what they're talking about. They pretty much speak in code to avoid incriminating themselves.

GP: *How does the Mafia from this era compare to the modern-day mobsters?*
JS: They're rooted in the same traditions, but I'd say there are some pretty big differences. I'll list a few:

Back in the day, you didn't read about made guys testifying against their former friends and family. Now these kinds of stories seem to make headlines all the time.

The drug trade wasn't what it is today, so other organized crime groups were less of a threat.

It was also arguably a hell of a lot harder to get caught back then—there was no such thing as electronic surveillance, and the federal government was more focused on the Commies than they were on the mob.

> "Anyone who grew up in a neighborhood run by the mob...these people usually have stories like you wouldn't believe."
> ***—Jack Scalici, 2K Games' director of creative production***

GP: *Do you have any funny, scary, or sad stories as a result of Mafia II's development? Did you encounter any trouble from delving into the world of organized crime?*
JS: Funny: Czechs learning to speak English—specifically, Italian-American English. We have a big building in the Czech Republic loaded with developers, mostly Czech guys, who are working on Mafia II. Many if not most of these guys are in the process of becoming fluent in English. Unfortunately, they are learning the absolute worst possible words and phrases by working with the Mafia II script. This is, after all, a mature story featuring characters with some very "colorful" speech.

Funny and sad: I worked with one actor who by all appearances was born to play the part of a character in this game. However, he had some difficulty pronouncing the word "c***sucker." We don't make heavy use of that term in the game, but it does pop up once or twice. You really can't make a game based on the Mafia without it. Anyway, we spent about 15 minutes debating the correct pronunciation in a room with two women in it.

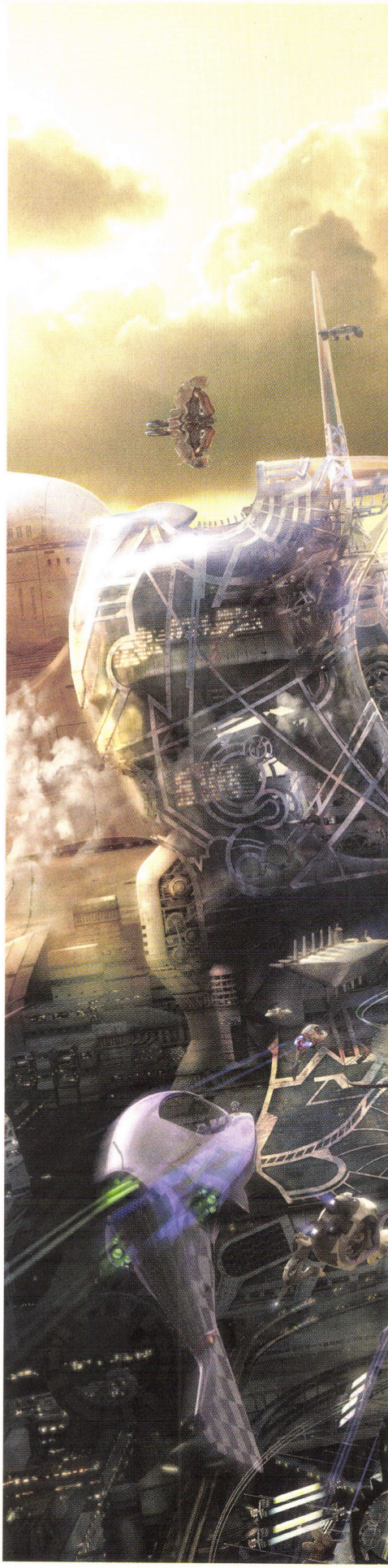
Challenging: When you're writing, you spend time carefully choosing and polishing your character's words until you end up with a line of dialog that you're proud of. Terrific. Now you need to go back and write nine more lines that mean the same thing, because you can't have that one line repeating for the duration of the game. This is the lament of many a game writer I've spoken to.

Trouble: I'll only say that if any trouble did arise from delving into the world of the mob, it certainly wouldn't be something I would be able or willing to speak about in a public forum such as this.

SPAWN POINT

LUCKY XIII

Square may have finally figured out how to mix the fresh with the familiar in Final Fantasy.

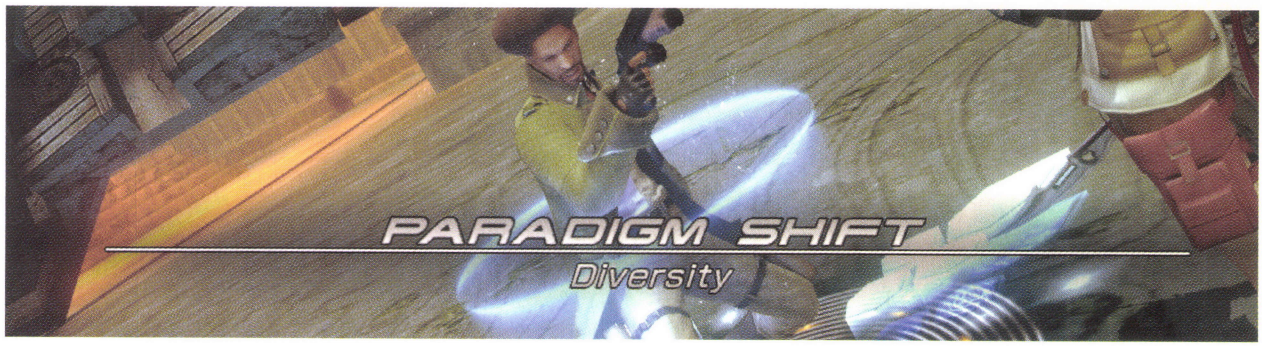


The role-playing genre is at a crossroads. With the release of Final Fantasy VII, the Western perception of the genre transformed. No longer were RPGs something just for *Dungeons & Dragons* nerds and anime fans—they now were lengthy, beautiful epics that drew players of all shades and skill levels into their winding, unfolding melodrama. But as the years passed, a rift has appeared between the Western and Japanese approaches to the genre.

While Western developers embraced more player control over character creation and story development, the Japanese continued to emphasize preset characters, storylines, and elaborate combat engines. Now we see many calling the Eastern approach "stifling" and "outdated" in the face of top-notch Western efforts like Fable II and Mass Effect, dismissing the entire pool of Japanese RPGs as boring, design cliché–riddled relics. FFXIII faces a similar challenge as its ancestor; just as Final Fantasy VII destroyed preconceived notions about the RPG genre and brought it into the mainstream, Final Fantasy XIII is in a prime position to kill the cynicism many now harbor toward Japanese RPGs.

In many ways, FFXIII is a departure for the storied series: It's the first non-spinoff title in 15 years with a female lead character (Lightning); it features a major revamp of the series' often-used Active Time Battle combat system; and it uses sci-fi–esque set pieces and elements far more prominently than any other Final Fantasy. It's also the first Final Fantasy to receive a simultaneous multiplatform release—for as the gaming landscape has changed, so have the economics and console demographics surrounding it. People who doubt the Japanese RPG's capability to evolve with changing tastes and technology should take note.

But one of the main reasons why fans love their JRPGs is a sense of familiarity. The Final Fantasy faithful already have expectations when they buy these games, and seeing beloved story elements, characters, and gameplay ideas re-emerge is simultaneously exciting and comforting. It's this mix of fresh and familiar that makes Final Fantasy XIII a special experience.



A Modern Touch

Final Fantasy has always been on the cutting edge of visual design, from the hardware-pushing 16-bit visuals of Final Fantasy III for the Super NES to the blend of CG cinematics and settings with polygon character models in Final Fantasy VII for the PlayStation to the ornate, exquisitely detailed 3D world of Final Fantasy XII for the PS2. Final Fantasy XIII is the first game to take the series into HD, and it's undoubtedly one of the most gorgeous games available. The difference the power of the HD consoles makes is striking—while the PS2 Final Fantasys boasted memorable art design, the sheer amount of detail in the visuals here not only blows everything those games offered out of the water but also establishes FFXIII among the best-looking games of this generation. You'll still find some prerendered CG in cut-scenes, but it's a testament to the game's visual strength that it's often difficult to distinguish between what is prerendered and what is displayed in real-time.

What is particularly distinct about Final Fantasy XIII's graphics, however, is its more sci-fi–inspired imagery. Many players remember the city of Midgar from Final Fantasy VII, a more modern-looking metropolis standing amid typical fantasy settings. Cocoon, the suspended sky-world of FFXIII, reminds us of a Midgar flung even further into the future, replete with floating machinery of many configurations, high-tech weaponry and stormtrooper-style combat armor, and glowing, mechanical save points and treasure containers. Cocoon is mysterious and inviting, begging to be explored and have its secrets laid bare, but it's also unfamiliar and intimidating. You've never seen anything quite like this in a Final Fantasy title (a few areas in Final Fantasy IV come close, but they never looked anything like the 3D realms on display here).

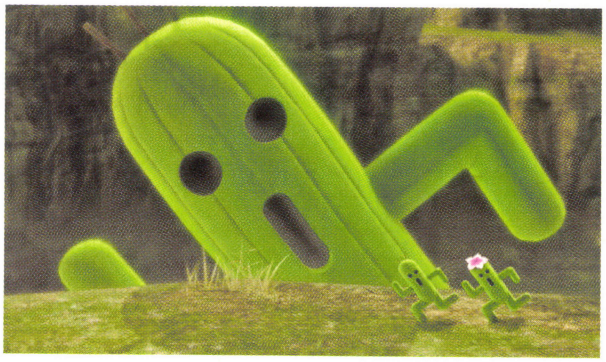
Later, the heroes reach the outside world of Pulse. The contrast between Cocoon and the more down-to-earth (figuratively and literally) Pulse is striking—where Cocoon often looks like a set design for a theatrical blockbuster, Pulse is a strange, beautiful wilderness with a wonder all of its own.

Driving the Story Home

Final Fantasy is known for its heavily story-driven gameplay, but would the stories be anywhere near as memorable without the characters? Both the narrative and the backgrounds of its key players have been the source of much speculation for fans of the series, and we received a brief but tantalizing look into the saga.

The aforementioned dual worlds, Cocoon and Pulse, make up the game's setting. Cocoon is completely controlled by a theocratic government with vast amounts of technology at the disposal of its army, known as PSICOM. The powers that be consider Pulse a terrible, impure

"FINAL FANTASY XIII IS IN A PRIME POSITION TO KILL THE CYNICISM MANY NOW HARBOR TOWARD JAPANESE RPGS."



place that no citizen of Cocoon must ever be exposed to. They also aim to suppress the l'Cie—humans branded and granted supernatural powers by god-like beings called the fal'Cie. Those exposed to Pulse find themselves "Purged" and exiled from Cocoon. But when the l'Cie receive powers, they also get a "Focus"—an unspoken goal that they interpret through visions and must achieve at the risk of transforming into a monster. During a fight against the Cocoon army, much of the party finds themselves exposed to a fal'Cie from Pulse, branding them as l'Cie and bestowing visions upon each of them. Thus begins the group's struggle to save the very world that wishes to destroy them....

Lightning, the central character, is an former soldier with a tumultuous relationship to her sister, Serah. She now fights against Cocoon forces to stop the purge of those exposed to Pulse. In many ways, she is similar to FFVII's Cloud—her military background, her chilly demeanor, her troubled past. You first see her with the afro-sporting Sazh at her side sabotaging a transport carrying those sentenced to exile. Sazh is a far cry from the oft-criticized "big angry black man" stereotype Barrett embodied in FFVII. A capable fighter, Sazh is an older man, wise in the ways of the world compared to the younger party members. He also hosts comic relief—a baby Chocobo nests in Sazh's hair and has its own (adorable) opinion on events.

Another central figure, Snow, debuts toward the beginning of the game with his Nora resistance forces in tow. He has his own relationship with Lightning—he and Serah are engaged, a union Lightning does not approve of—but the relationship becomes much more complicated very quickly. Hope and Vanille are both youths who have suffered greatly at the hands of Cocoon's forces, though the way they each deal with their pain through the course of the story is quite different. Finally, Fang is the most ambiguous of the group; she's a tough government officer seemingly from Pulse and carries the l'Cie mark. She initially antagonizes the party, but her unusual circumstances shall no doubt provide some twists in the story. You may interact with numerous NPCs and villains as well, both in traditional cut-scenes and through gameplay. Unlike most RPGs, you do not walk up to a person and press a button to engage in conversation; you hear speech and information by approaching other characters. This makes for a more fluid experience.

Turning the Tide

Players spend most of a Final Fantasy game in combat; FFXIII is no exception. The combat system, dubbed Command Synergy Battle, draws heavily from the traditional Active Time Battle system of previous Final Fantasys, but it throws several twists into the mix.

Enemies are visible on the map, and you can try to stay out of their sight,

‘FANS OF CHRONO TRIGGER SHALL NO DOUBT SEE SIMILARITIES TO THE SNES CLASSIC IN THE WAY FFXIII APPROACHES BATTLE ENGAGEMENT.’

outrun them, sneak up on them, or engage them head-on. Fans of Chrono Trigger shall no doubt see similarities to the SNES classic in the way FFXIII approaches battle engagement. Upon entering battle, a bar gauge (the ATB Bar) begins to fill up. The bar is divided into multiple segments, and you don't have to wait until any part of the bar is full to select commands. Instead, you put commands into a queue by either entering them manually or selecting the "Auto Battle" option and letting the CPU handle that turn. The attacks execute when all of your available ATB bars are charged. This is why magic spells don't have a magic-point cost—in fact, MP is nonexistent in FFXIII. Instead, all of your spells and techniques cost a certain number of ATB bar segments. For example, if you have three segments, you can queue a one-bar Fight command and a two-bar Ruin spell to chain together as a single attack. A quick button press allows you to immediately execute any commands sitting in your queue using as many segments you currently have full, leaving the remainder to carry over for later.

It's tactically advantageous, however, to execute full chain attacks as much as possible. As you land chains on enemies, a percentage meter by their HP bar increases, and once it hits a certain point, the enemy goes into "stagger" mode. When enemies are in stagger mode, they become extra vulnerable, allowing party members to inflict more damage. The foes eventually recover, so it's important to take advantage of a staggered enemy while you can.

Also interesting is that you can only control a single character—your party's current lead—and cannot change characters mid-combat or issue specific commands to your teammates. Instead, you give your CPU-controlled party members commands by means of the "Paradigm Shift" system that changes their combat role. Pressing L1 at any time brings up a list of paradigms to pick from, each one bestowing different roles upon your teammates (Medic, Commando, Sentinel, etc.). It's important to keep tabs on what roles your crew has at all times and swap when necessary—if a member is currently assigned a fighter's role, they won't stop to heal you even if you are near death. And if your leader dies, it's game over—though you can choose to restart from the beginning of any battle you fall in.

Succeeding in combat nets players CP Points and a star ranking based on overall battle performance. The characters don't earn experience points, however—they develop through use of the "Crystarium System." Similar to FFX's Sphere Grid, FFXIII's characters develop through the use of CP Points to advance along circular, multitiered structures, picking up various skills and ability augmentations along the way. Numerous development paths are available for each character, each associated with roles they can assume via Paradigm Shift.

Expect twists to certain encounters as well. You must defeat Eidolons (the game's summons) in battle before you can use them, but you don't tame them through reducing their HP to zero—rather, you beat them by successfully determining and satisfying other combat requirements that vary with each Eidolon encounter. Summoned Eidolons take the place of the supporting characters on the battlefield. They later transform into "Gestalt" mode, where they assume a vehicular form. In this mode, the Eidolons have a set amount of attack points, and players can select from numerous attacks until they expend all of these points. The Eidolon then exits.

Although its frenetic pace and abundance of factors to track makes battle a bit overwhelming at first, combat in FFXIII quickly becomes a fresh and fun. It gives players plenty of incentive to master its nuances, too—FFXIII offers numerous optional objectives, including missions you can pick up from various locations and massive monsters that test the mettle of even the most seasoned warriors.

What's Old Is New

Perhaps one of the most surprising elements of FFXIII's development was the announcement of a dual-platform release. Unfortunately, we can't say much about the 360 version, as we played the PS3 version for our exclusive demo. Square assures us that the differences between the 360 and PS3 editions are miniscule (they're mostly related to movie compression and the amount of discs the game needs to store the game).

Gaming certainly has changed since FFVII made the RPG a viable genre on consoles in the West, but FFXIII looks more than able to meet the challenges of the current market. The years of development that went into this title shine through in every facet of its visuals, game design, and storytelling. It has a helluva legacy to live up to, but the near-finished product looks poised to deliver one of the most amazing experiences of this generation—and prove beyond a doubt that Japanese-developed RPGs still have what it takes to stand proudly among their peers.***–Heidi Kemps***

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"IT IS A TESTAMENT TO THE GAME'S VISUAL STRENGTH THAT IT IS OFTEN DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN WHAT IS PRERENDERED AND WHAT IS DISPLAYED IN REAL-TIME."

YOUR GAME, MY VOICE

A LOOK INSIDE 2K SPORTS' RECORDING STUDIO AND MY DRUNKEN CHEERS.

SPAWN POINT

Most of the time, I'm the last person you'd expect to hear yelling at a baseball game. I spent my younger years at the old Shea Stadium in Queens diligently filling out box scores. Nowadays, I'm content to drink a few beers and direct sarcastic quips to the multimillionaires running around the field for my enjoyment. When 2K Sports put out the offer for a *GamePro* staffer to come to their studios in Novato, California, and record "crowd chatter"—taunts and cheers heard above the crowd noise—I accepted out of my love of baseball, even though I doubted I was the right man for the job.

I remember getting vocal at only three of the dozens of baseball games I've attended. The first two are when the New York Mets tied for the National League East pennant in the final game of 1999's regular season and when they captured the NL championship in 2000. The third time is 2009, when I saw the Mets wallop the Giants at AT&T Park in San Francisco. AT&T Park is like a library compared to the old Shea. Even when the Giants are in contention, the apathy at the park is deafening. I had to yell just to break the monotony.

So after I ended up at 2K Sports, yelling words of encouragement for the Mets and insults at the New York Yankees with a ferociousness I rarely exhibit, I wondered what inspired me to do this (besides the Corona swishing around in my empty stomach). As I hollored cheers such as "Long live the Mets! Long live Queens" and implored Mets ace Johan Santana to "Make 'em sweat that power curve!" I pondered the source of my inspiration: Was it the baseball game or the opportunity to immortalize my rants? Or was I just cutting through monotony again?

If the MLB 2K series has been slipping in recent years, it certainly isn't because of a lack of passion on the development side. Die-hard fans of just about every sport, their offices and cubicles filled with sports memorabilia, work at 2K Sports. They also have their biggest bats ready when it comes to creating a great audio experience. While that's not going to carry a game on its own, it's a damn good start.

The crowd chatter is diverse. I spouted roughly 10 insults and cheers for each player and even more for the Mets, Yankees, Philadelphia Phillies, and Atlanta Braves. From what I heard, the game has a wide assortment of voices, as fans from the ages of 5 to 60 join baseball die-hards such as me and the 2K crew in the chatter. These include a developer's son, who had the ill fortune to record during his "puberty voice" phase, and Paulette, a 5-foot-2 employee at 2K whose booming voice surprised the team. The common element, says Sound Editor Justin Rothaug, is passion. "It's always great having true baseball fans in the booth," he says. "The excitement always stands out in the game."

While I contributed just to the game's audience audio, the sound developers appear to have the bases covered. When Audio Director Joel Simmons aired his complaint about sports-game commentary, saying, "It was always in a bubble—just the two teams," it rang true with one of my biggest issues with sports games—that the games, be they exhibition match-ups or franchise tilts, rarely acknowledge other players and teams that aren't on the field. 2K Sports' plan for the game's MLB Today mode should bring current events in baseball, like trades and injuries, into the game audio thanks to its complex and diverse commentary system. You may not have many instances of multiple no-hitters or unassisted triple plays, but they recorded commentary just in case these things happen.

I had two doubts about my recording session. Would the Major League Baseball Players Association license prevent me from expressing criticism of ballplayers during my chatter? And would the game's likely E rating curtail true drunken fan rage?

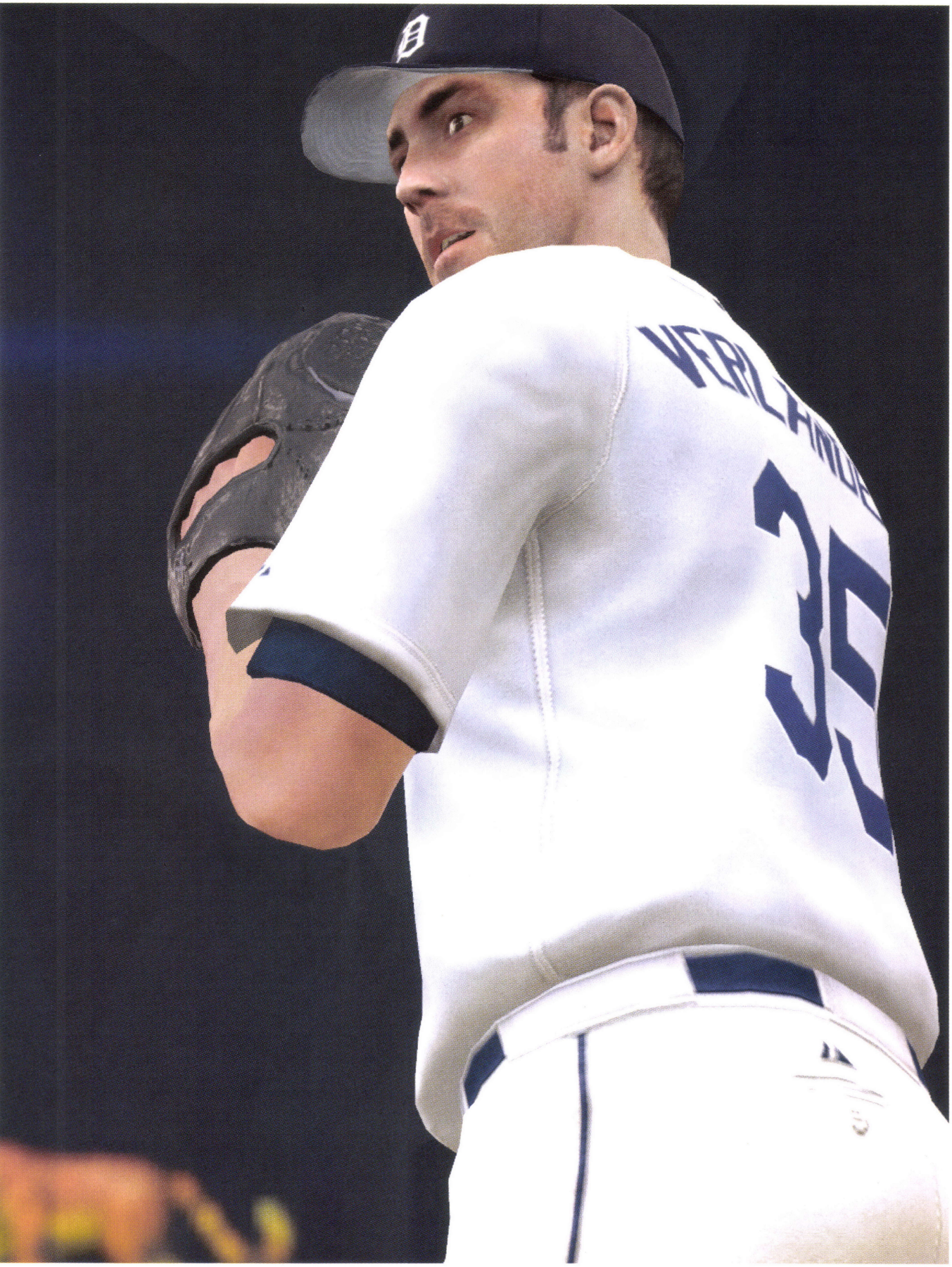
John Kruk, the former Phillies star and a current analyst for ESPN's *Baseball Tonight*, joins the booth as the third voice of 2K10's broadcast team. He addresses both of my concerns while talking about his experience with the game, affirming that I could jeer players and call them out for lousy play. After all, that's part of Kruk's job, both on the air and in the game. "If a guy had a bad year in 2009, I'd be a fool not to bring that up." Kruk says. "I'm not going to worry about any player calling me."

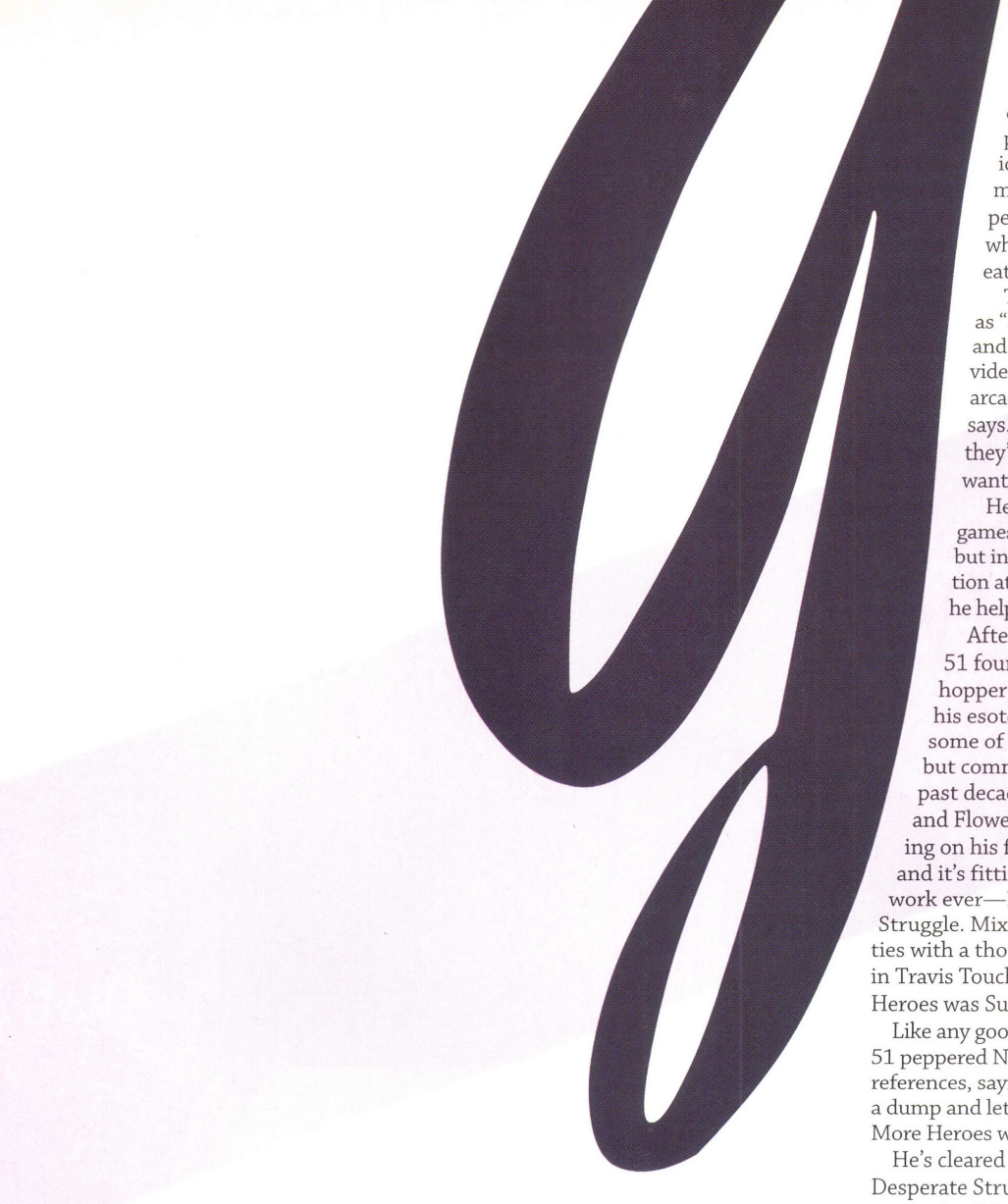
But even an outspoken guy like Kruk needs to know the audience. Kids like Kruk's 7-year-old son, who's beginning to enjoy video games, play 2K's sports titles. "I wouldn't want him to hear me say bad words, so I'm sure not going to want everyone else hearing me say things that are negative."

That really helped me put things into perspective. Even the rowdiest baseball fan should understand that a child might be sitting in their section. While I could call Alex "Pay-Rod" Rodriguez a big baby and tell Johnny Damon that his girlfriend's hot, profanity was indeed off the table.

Unless my words offended 2K Sports, I should be in MLB 2K10 during Mets, Yankees, Phillies, and Braves games when the title comes out this spring. The audio team has put their best players on the field—it's now up to the rest of 2K Sports to drive in the winning run.

—Dave Rudden





SUDA 51'S DESPERATE STRUGGLE

Has Goichi Suda finally found the balance between entertaining and bizarre?

Goichi Suda lives to surprise people. His unconventional ideas make him one of gaming's most interesting—and vexing—people. It doesn't surprise me when I hear that Suda somehow eats three hamburgers a day.

The designer known to gamers as "Suda 51" is from Nagano, Japan, and spent his youth immersed in video games. "I pretty much lived in arcades when I was a kid," Suda 51 says. "I always thought, 'They're big; they're fun; they're flamboyant—I want to live inside this world."

He didn't start his working life in games—he was an undertaker first—but in his mid-20s, he earned a position at Human Entertainment, where he helped design pro-wrestling titles.

After working with Human, Suda 51 founded his own studio, Grasshopper Manufacture. Here he refined his esoteric sensibilities, developing some of the most critically acclaimed but commercially ignored titles of the past decade, including Killer 7, Contact, and Flower, Sun, and Rain. He's working on his first sequel bound for the U.S., and it's fitting that it's his most American work ever—No More Heroes 2: Desperate Struggle. Mixing Japanese design sensibilities with a thoroughly American protagonist in Travis Touchdown, the original No More Heroes was Suda 51's biggest hamburger yet.

Like any good hamburger, it was filling. Suda 51 peppered No More Heroes with cultural references, saying, "The thing I did was...I took a dump and let it all out, and that was what No More Heroes was."

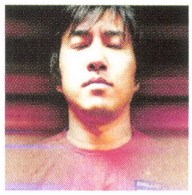
He's cleared room for more in the sequel. Desperate Struggle mirrors the development methods of the first. "Whatever was left inside of me from No More Heroes was dumped out into No More Heroes 2," Suda 51 says.

Suda 51 approached No More Heroes: Desperate Struggle in a way that differs from most of his body of work. With little left to share from his own gut, Suda 51 is calling upon his greatest and most vocal resource—his fans. Throughout our lengthy playable demo of the game, Suda 51 was quick to mention this mantra: "No More Heroes: Desperate Struggle was made by the fans, for the fans."

It's weird to hear Suda 51 say that. Although gamers love his games, his works often feel like they're made with an ulterior motive that just happens to jibe with many gamers' tastes. Suda 51 has perfected the mindf*** that so many hardcore gamers crave.

In his review of Suda 51's previous game, Flower, Sun, and Rain, *GamePro*'s Will Herring called the DS adventure "*Groundhog Day* meets *Twin Peaks*." While my time with the game is infinitesimal compared to Will's, after only an hour playing it, I could see the roots of Will's statement that Flower is "one

SPAWN POINT



> "I TOOK A DUMP AND LET IT ALL OUT, AND THAT WAS WHAT NO MORE HEROES WAS."
>
> *—Goichi Suda, founder, Grasshopper Manufacture*

moment a modern masterpiece and the next an absolute chore." What other game drops you in a parking lot with a suite of scientific tools but without a single clue as to how to use them?

In preparation for our interview, I played Contact, a DS role-playing game likened to both Earthbound and The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion in our review. Before the game even started, it took me outside of my comfort zone when it asked me to divulge a deep, dark secret right after I named the main character Dave. Three hours in, the game's knowledge of said secret looms larger than any enemy I've encountered. I often stand on the precipice of ordering the main character to take advantage of his ability to kill anyone in the game, from innkeepers to rambunctious children. I feel like I can do so with a sense of detachment because not long after I started playing, I learned that I was actually playing as an observer of the main character. I named the observer David. Unfortunately, the aforementioned secret undercuts any god complex that David could hope to form. This may be the first RPG I finish since my college days.

Even No More Heroes, one of Suda 51's most fan-friendly games, has a sort of grounding dichotomy. Travis Touchdown appeals to hardcore gamers, with a limitless supply of snarky quips to accompany his *Akira*-style motorcycle and lightsaber-like weapon that draws blood by the bucketful. He also represents a handful of stereotypes about gamers, fruitlessly lusting after every female in the game and living in a dumpy motel crammed with anime and wrestling memorabilia (as well as a cat). For every minute I spent slashing through faceless goons with Wii Remote strikes, I spent two earning money from grunt labor such as collecting coconuts and pumping gas.

A handful of press members took on different aspects of Desperate Struggle during a recent presentation. I battled a boss, employing the same fighting techniques that won me over back when I reviewed the original. A fellow scribe tried out a sequence at Travis' motel in which he trains his overweight cat; I secretly wished to trade places with him, as I'm also hoping to help my cats lose weight. *GamePro*'s Andy Burt engaged in an 8-bit-styled training session in which Travis deflects and dodges barbells. It seems every bit as rote as pumping gas, but it has a retro sheen to it.

Suda 51 shares my high expectations for No More Heroes: Desperate Struggle. "The way I produce games is that I want to make games that you can't play anywhere else," he says. "So you're gonna have dark portions of the game, but you're also gonna have funny, quirky moments."

The "dark portion" I saw occurred when assassins kill the clerk at Travis' video store, inspiring the hero to seek revenge. In the bigger scheme of Suda 51, though, I hope he's talking about his next mindf***. ***—Dave Rudden***

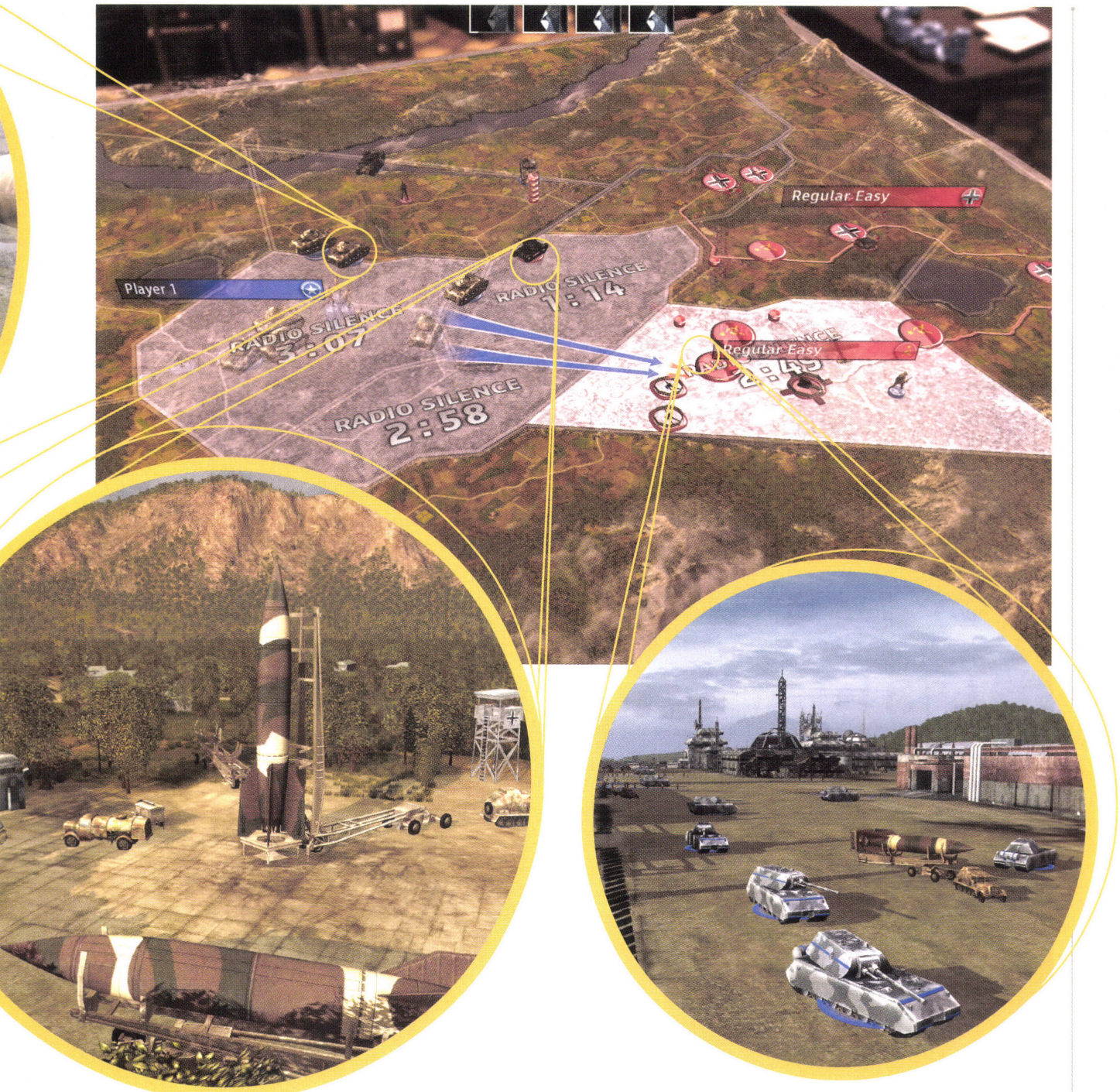
SPAWN POINT

Controlling the Board

R.U.S.E. takes real-time strategy in a new direction with an astounding sense of scale and massive World War II firefights.

Imagine you're playing a game of Risk. The infantry, cavalry, and artillery pieces litter the board. The dice sit in your hand as you ready an attack. Suddenly, the pieces spring to life; tanks, infantry, and warplanes launch massive assaults. This is my initial impression of R.U.S.E., Ubisoft's upcoming entry in the World War II real-time-strategy genre for the Xbox 360 and PC. Every mention of R.U.S.E. that I've heard or read describes it as "that one RTS that has touch-screen capability." And while the game does indeed include this feature, the way R.U.S.E. blends RTS gameplay with thoroughly convincing board-game mechanics is far more interesting.

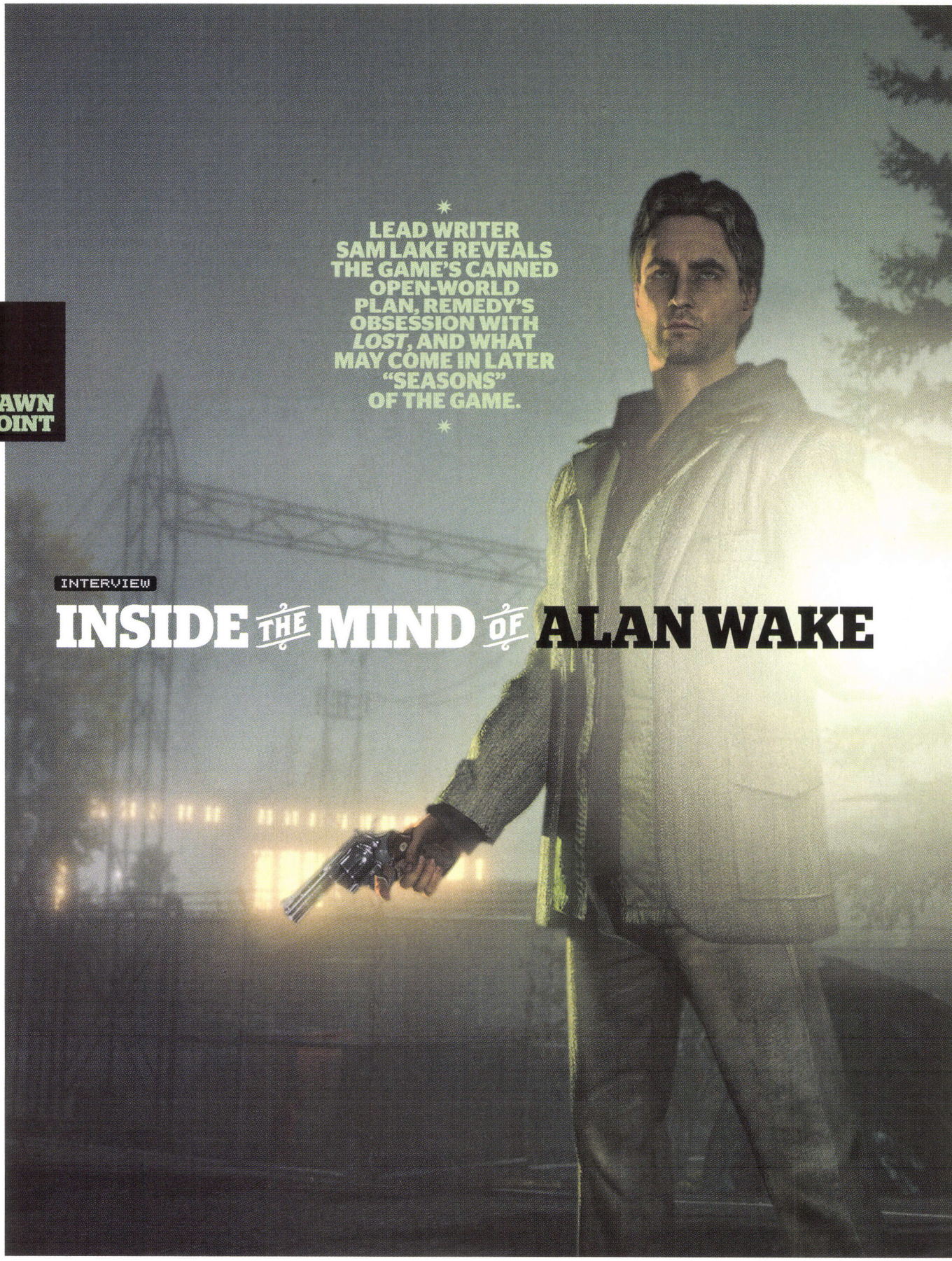
R.U.S.E.'s battles take place on a giant interactive war board that changes depending on a battle's location. From a zoomed-out view, you can see the board's edges and the room in which the game's main character, Major Joseph Sheridan, issues commands. From far away units appear as circular discs, but zoom in slightly and the units resemble their classes; tank formations look like a single giant tank, and one huge running soldier represents an infantry. Zooming in further not only gives astounding detail to the battle locations, like the sandy wastes of Tunisia during the Battle of Kasserine Pass, but also allows you to control each unit with precision. The sense of scale R.U.S.E. displays is impressive and can help players strategize with great accuracy.



Taking me through a few of the game's first campaign missions, Senior Producer Mathieu Girard demonstrates how to use the game's ruse mechanics. You can activate different deception tools in the middle of a battle to throw your enemy off. Decryption allows players to see all enemy movement on the battlefield; this intel can prove invaluable when it comes to placing your forces. Activating the Decoy Offensive ruse creates a group of dummy troops, like a cluster of tanks; these are difficult to distinguish from normal units, giving you extra time to launch a real offensive. Zooming out on the board allows you to identify which ruses are in use and how much longer they are in effect.

I also briefly checked out the game's touch-screen mechanics, which work with any Windows 7 PC and a touch-screen-enabled monitor. Issuing commands is fairly simplistic; click on a unit and drag it toward the location you want it to go, and an arrow appears denoting where the unit stops. You may zoom this view in and out by pinching two fingers together or pulling them away, similar to the way an iPhone zoom works, and placing one finger on the screen and rotating another around it spins the battlefield's viewpoint. It's all very intuitive and should interest PC RTS fans.

R.U.S.E.'s sense of scale, cue to old-fashioned wargaming, and touch-screen controls help it stand out from the rest of the RTS genre. You can see for yourself when the game arrives early this year.
—Andy Burt



LEAD WRITER SAM LAKE REVEALS THE GAME'S CANNED OPEN-WORLD PLAN, REMEDY'S OBSESSION WITH *LOST*, AND WHAT MAY COME IN LATER "SEASONS" OF THE GAME.

INTERVIEW

INSIDE THE MIND OF ALAN WAKE

GamePro: *Remedy has been developing Alan Wake for quite a while. How has the game changed since you first started work on it?*
Sam Lake: The high-level vision of Alan Wake was actually very clear to us already very early on. And in all honesty, though it has evolved, the concept has remained the same throughout the project. The major elements of the story have also stayed more or less the same. Sure, some things have changed. In the beginning Alice was Wake's girlfriend. But as you point out, the project took a while, so they've had time to get married. At some point we suddenly figured out that the best-selling books Wake wrote before his writer's block were actually crime thrillers set in New York, with a hard-boiled cop as the main character.

Jokes aside, we prototyped many different gameplay mechanics that fit the themes of the game. Some worked out well and became a part of the game; others we abandoned, as they were not entertaining or exciting enough.

Light and darkness were always elements in the core of the game. Early on we experimented with the concept of a free-roaming open world, but with that we would have been forced to make compromises and water down our tightly packed, story-driven experience, and we were not happy about that. Story-driven games are what we do, and pacing is a very important part of a good thriller.

GP: *The game is obviously inspired by other mediums, such as literature, film, and especially television. How do the team's favorite books, movies, or shows inspire the creative process?*
SL: Stephen King's works are one obvious source of inspiration. Our small-town setting, the town of Bright Falls, definitely has an echo of *Twin Peaks* in it. Of the more modern TV series, *Lost* made a big impression on us.

Popular culture in general is something that we follow very keenly, and different pop-culture influences and references have a strong presence in our games. Naturally, we hope that our games in turn contribute something new and exciting back to that pool.

GP: *Light is a prominent feature in Alan Wake. How do players use this mechanic to their advantage?*
SL: Light represents sanity and safety in the game. It's a combat tool for the player, an essential tool for survival. The enemies taken over by darkness are immune to normal damage until the dark presence that protects them has been destroyed with light by the player. The darkness can also take over objects such as doors and gates, which block the player's path until the dark presence has been destroyed. The player has various tools of light that he can use: different flashlights, hand flares, flare guns, flash-bangs, the headlights of vehicles, searchlights, generators to power up stationary lights, and so on. Light is a source of safety, to the point where Wake actually regains his health much faster in a safe haven of light than in darkness.

GP: *What are some of the elements of Alan Wake that you couldn't execute in Max Payne?*
SL: The tech and tools are evolving so fast that there are a lot of things, actually. One noticeable area is the use of nonplayer characters in the game. We have scenes in the game where they play large parts; this used to be much more difficult in the past. Don't get me wrong: It's not the simplest thing to do even today. But much progress has been made.

Another thing is the large and impressive outdoor locations. Our previous games took place in a city and indoors, for the most part. In Alan Wake, the action takes place in the small town of Bright Falls and the wilderness that surrounds it, and the areas and the distances you are operating with are vast.

GP: *The team said that Alan Wake is only the first "season" of what's planned to be a continuing show. What else do you want to explore in this world? Would the story and setting continue in Bright Falls?*
SL: The game plunges the player deep into Alan Wake's world, but at the same time it's only the first step. There are hints about various mysteries in Bright Falls and beyond the town as well. And the ending, while it brings the story to the conclusion that it deserves, also opens up doors to many new chapters, or "seasons," if you prefer. Alan Wake's story is just about to begin, and we hope that it will go on for a long time. G

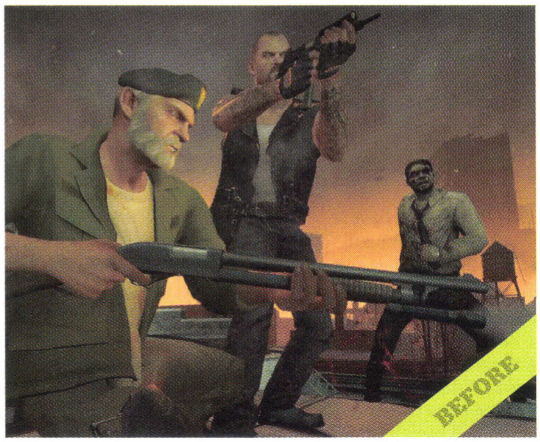
The DEMAKE

PLAY TODAY'S BEST GAMES...YESTERDAY!

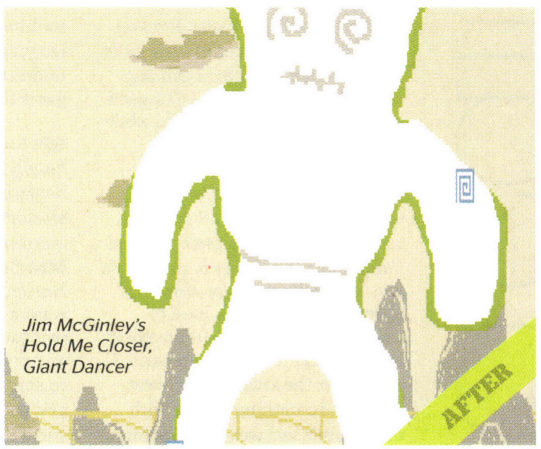
Crafting a remake of a treasured title is a daunting task even for seasoned video-game developers. When successful, as in the cases of the GameCube versions of Metal Gear Solid and Resident Evil, the remake can garner the same acclaim as the original. But if you apply older visual styles and gameplay elements to a modern marvel, the development of a remake takes on a completely different tone. We talked to developers who are "demaking" two of the most unique and critically acclaimed games of the last few years—Left 4 Dead and Shadow of the Colossus.

★ ★ ★

"Demake" refers to games that are re-created using technology that emulates older consoles, like the 8-bit Nintendo Entertainment System. Phil Fish, creator of the popular indie game Fez, coined the term. Taking all of the gameplay and design of a modern video game and sizing it down to mimic older console technology sounds odd, but it's a practice that's flourishing online. The underground Chinese video-game market thrives on illegal adaptations of modern games on clones of older systems; the most famous is the 8-bit version of Final Fantasy VII that popped up on Internet message boards in 2005. Even though it's a fan-made port of a massive role-playing game, this FFVII demake contains most of the content from the original, down to the Materia system and the game's sizeable storyline.



Eric Ruth's 8-bit Left 4 Dead



Jim McGinley's Hold Me Closer, Giant Dancer

For a look at 13 fantastic fan-made remakes and demakes, see our feature online at: http://bit.ly/demakes

In other parts of the world, demakes are a pulsing hotbed of innovation for independent artists, coders, and game fans. Two titles in particular—an 8-bit demake of Left 4 Dead and the Atari-styled Hold Me Closer, Giant Dancer, a scaled-down version of Shadow of the Colossus—have recently gained the gaming community's attention thanks to their impressive art and style. What makes both of these games interesting is that even with limited graphics and gameplay elements, they retain the look and feel of the original titles that inspired their creation.

Eric Ruth, the creator of the NES-styled Left 4 Dead, favors the simplicity of retro titles that current games sometime lack. "Gameplay and control were much easier back in the good ol' days. It was simple. You had a D-pad, start and select for menu stuff, and 'B' and 'A' for actual play," Ruth says. "A lot of games today have an amalgamation of button setups and sequences that tend to overcomplicate the gameplay unnecessarily. This is the reason that games like Bejeweled and Zuma make millions while 90 percent of big studio titles barely hit the 100,000 mark: simplicity."

"Demakes are best described as caricatures of the real games. People are amazed when they can still recognize their game without all the extras," says Jim McGinley, creator of Hold Me Closer, Giant Dancer. "If the game is still compelling after the production values are removed, it proves the core gameplay is timeless. HMCGD proved Shadow of the Colossus's 'grab and hold' mechanic will still be used 50 years from now.

"In the last few years, now that graphics have reached an apex, I've noticed a marked return to refined, precise gameplay in modern triple-A games like Assassin's Creed 2, Portal, and Mirror's Edge."

Ruth plans to continue creating demakes under his independent studio, Eric Ruth Games, and Left 4 Dead is the first of many he wants to "demake" as part of his PixelForce series. Ruth says he hopes his work eventually earns him a job in video-game development.

McGinley also continues to make games at his indie studio, having gained useful feedback thanks to Hold Me Closer, Giant Dancer's appearance at The Independent Game Source Bootleg Demake Competition in 2008. ***—McKinley Noble***

INTERVIEW

MIKEY NEUMANN ON BORDERLANDS

after the credits.

SPAWN POINT

Between the extended delays and the drastic design changes made to Borderlands, many expected the game to die a quick death at the hands of gamers and critics. That didn't happen; Borderlands lit up sales charts, becoming the Xbox 360's World of Warcraft...with guns. Mikey Neumann, the game's creative director, is nearly as busy now with Borderlands as he was during development, delivering free loot to players like he's the video-game equivalent of Santa Claus. Read on to learn more about one of the most drastic design changes in gaming history as well as why it isn't a good idea to send Twitter messages while watching TV.

GamePro: *Borderlands' visual overhaul was a major part of its development cycle. What prompted that change? Did this change in visual style alter any of the gameplay elements?*
Mikey Neumann: It's hard to remember exactly which came first in that chicken/egg-like scenario. I remember the artists really wanting to do something drastic with the art style and were just starting to do tests on Fyrestone. At the same time, the design team was starting to free itself into more zany playstyles and abilities. In the end, I think one allowed the other to happen, and vice versa.

GP: *Were any of your favorite visual ideas left out?*
MN: Not really. If anything, we kept getting ourselves into trouble for trying to fit just one more thing into the builds, right down to the end. I think the Crabworm was one of the last things to go in and had to be kept to certain areas in the event we couldn't finish its animation suite on time. I think it's to our enemy designer Ruben Cabrera's credit just how many enemy types are in the game. Even with really fancy models and rigs for all those monsters, somebody had to do all their A.I. routines.

GP: *Borderlands clearly, and sucessfully, borrows ideas from a number of role-playing games, like Diablo. How did other games influence Borderlands, and why did you use specific aspects from those titles?*
MN: Games are funny. We have to make interactive entertainment that is simple to jump in to for an audience or risk people not getting wrapped up in the game from the get-go. The Blizzard influence was great for determining language to use for the player so they understand everything from the start, like colors of rarity, skill trees, et cetera. People love WOW and Diablo, so it makes sense [to] piggyback language and ideas they already understand to get them into our game faster.

GP: *For something that borrows so heavily from RPG conventions, Borderlands doesn't have a huge amount of NPC dialogue. Why is everyone so quiet?*
MN: Borderlands sure as hell ain't *Hamlet*. We consciously did not want a deep, involving narrative in a game about melting midgets and punching Skags. That's not to say that our NPCs aren't funny and cool. Who doesn't love Scooter and TK?

I think if the audience wants a stronger narrative with more talkative characters in the future, that's something we'll look into. We certainly made strides there on our DLC and will continue to tighten the narrative in the future without losing our silly edge.

GP: *Some characters pop up with names that are mashups of well-known pop-culture icons. How many of these are in the game, and what prompted their inclusion?*
MN: Keith Schuler, one of the designers, did most of these. I swear to god—if you could live inside of a *Battlestar Galactica* DVD, he'd have a loft with Colonel Tigh. He loves his pop culture and added it in the game wherever he could. I'd say there's probably around 30 [characters with mashup names].

GP: *Mordecai and Lilith are character names with cultural and historical significance. Mordecai is a significant name from the Hebrew bible, and Lilith is a Mesopotamian storm demon and also a name in Hebrew myth. What's up with Brick and Roland?*
MN: You were correct with the literary significance. If you recall, when we announced Borderlands in the previous art style, there was no Brick. It was Lilith, Mordecai, and Roland. At that time, the game was still pretty serious, and the names fit the universe. As the art style changed and we started adding, everyone wanted to keep the names, and the fans already knew them. It seemed like a crime to arbitrarily change them for the sake of "more attitude." When all was said and done, we added Brick to the lineup and liked how simple his name was.

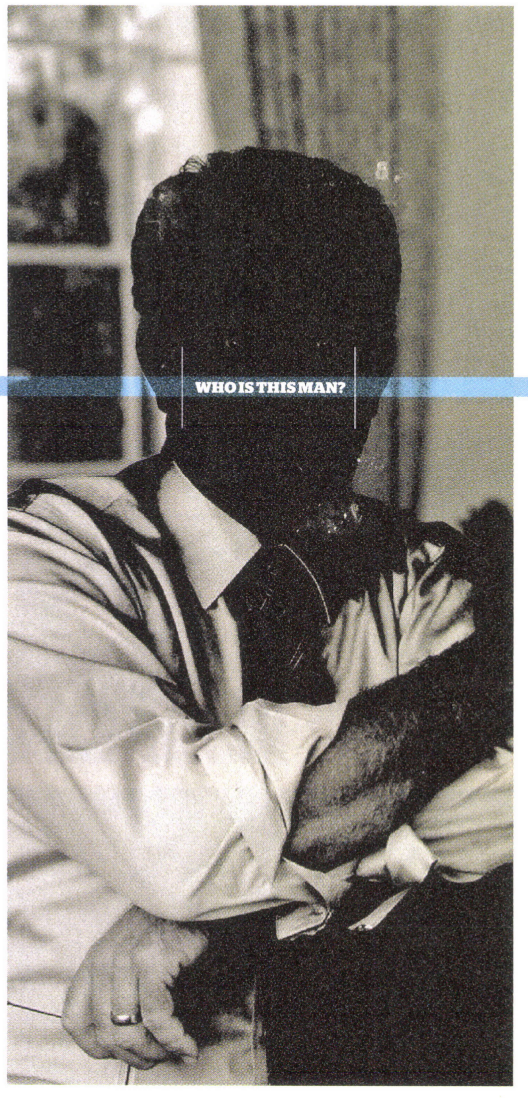
GP: *Dr. Ned's Zombie Island has a great deal of narrative flair, almost in purposeful contrast to Borderlands' somewhat story-light campaign. Will future DLC incorporate more elements to flesh out new characters and settings? How is Gearbox deciding what areas of Pandora to reveal via DLC?*
MN: We hope that each DLC expands our universe in meaningful ways. What's exciting for us is making all of these new inhabitants of Pandora, like Moxxi, the star of [a recent] DLC for Borderlands. Each DLC represents something the community is asking for in some way.

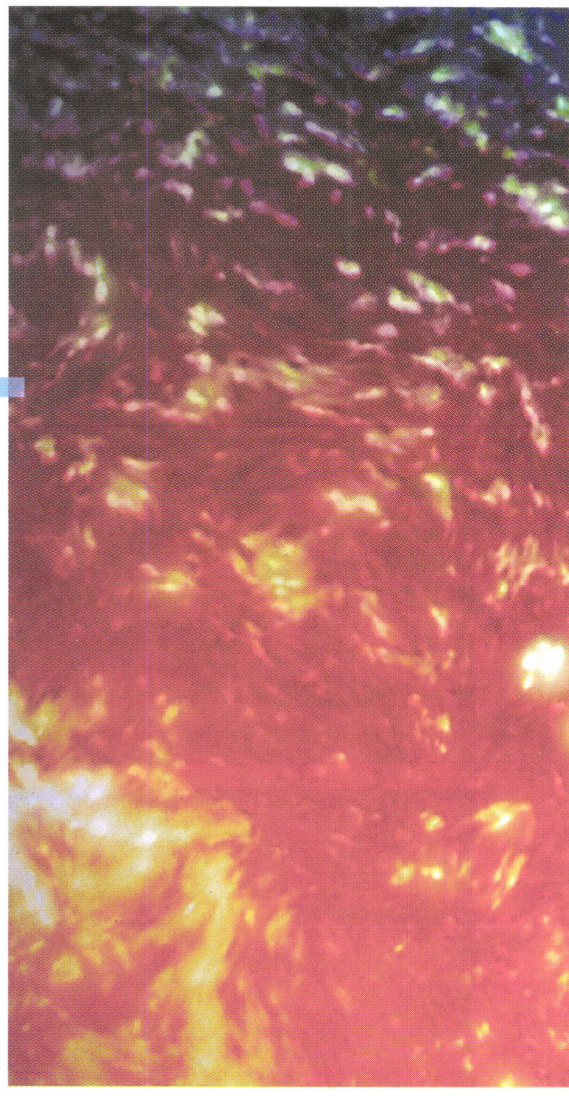
DLC is awesome for developers. You can come up with ideas, implement them, and get that content into customer's hands all within a matter of months. It's very rewarding.

GP: *How long did it take you to fulfill the loot promise you made to anyone who could prove that they preordered Borderlands? Did you have any interesting interactions with fans?*
MN: I got pretty far! I'm still working on it. I was able to take an entire week off of work when the game was released, and I got through as many as I could. After the websites picked up my Twitter account, it became pretty much impossible to go through all of them. So I've been doing what I can to alleviate that, like handing out DLC codes.

I'll be more careful in the future when I randomly Tweet things while watching Sunday football.

WELCOME





SPAWN POINT

Who Is the Illusive Man?

THE SHADOWY LEADER OF CERBERUS IN MASS EFFECT 2 MAY BE MORE THAN MEETS THE EYE.

Like any good sci-fi epic, turmoil infuses the beginning of Mass Effect 2. The trilogy's second act introduces a few new gameplay twists, but it's the introduction of the game's new key players that marks a departure from the first game. The enigmatic Illusive Man, the secrets behind the group known as Cerberus, and the game's first obvious antagonist, the human-harvesting race known as the Collectors, make themselves known early on in Mass Effect 2—though we're unsure of their ultimate motivations. Shepard also undergoes a transformation that significantly impacts his role in the second act. We've taken a look at what awaits fans at the start of the game and how these additions hint at the dark path Shepard unknowingly finds himself taking.

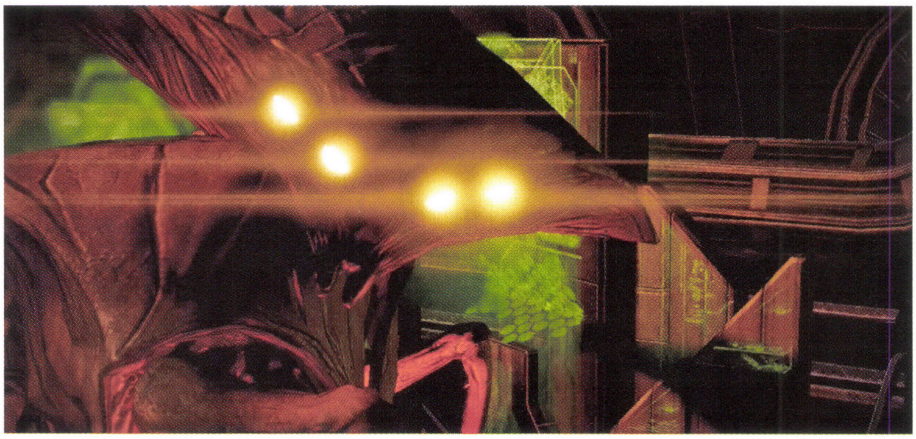
ME2

Martin Sheen probably could've sleepwalked through his role as the voice of the Illusive Man, and many players wouldn't have noticed. The 69-year-old actor's distinctive presence complements the mysterious persona of The Illusive Man, whose motives for resurrecting Shepard (see page 50) remain murky. "He's the kind of guy that always stresses that the ends justify the means," Sheen says. Players meet the Illusive Man early on as he informs Shepard that he may be the only person who "stands between humanity and the greatest threat of our brief existence."That sounds enigmatic and also begs this question: Why does he choose Shepard as his instrument?

During the Illusive Man's brief time with Shepard near the beginning of the game, he assigns our hero a task: Discover why humans are mysteriously disappearing throughout the galaxy. This first mission sees Shepard traveling to Freedom's Progress, the latest colony stripped of its human presence. The game presents the Illusive Man as someone very different from everyone in the Mass Effect universe; his business-like mannerisms and casual yet assertive voice (it seems like BioWare crafted the part with Sheen in mind) set him apart, and oddly enough, he's the one person who finally answers the question of whether or not smoking exists in the 22nd century (hint: The answer is yes).

The most striking aspect of the Illusive Man is how he feels sinister even though he presents himself as an ally. You get the sense that he's manipulating all of the events as he directs Shepard on his path; he feels like a mastermind right out of a James Bond flick. Players also learn that the Illusive Man heads up Cerberus, who fans remember as the prohumanity military group that performed horrific experiments. Their role in the story is exponentially greater in Mass Effect 2, though we don't know whether or not they turn out to be friend or foe.

"LUCKY FOR SHEPARD, THE ILLUSIVE MAN PULLS TOGETHER A TEAM OF EXPERTS TO FIND HIM AND PUT HIM BACK TOGETHER."



ME2

Project Lazarus: Shepard 2.0

As many of the early Mass Effect 2 trailers hint, Shepard dies at the beginning of the game—and no, it's not one of the oft-talked about "Shepard lives or dies depending on what you do" situations. An unidentified ship launches a surprise attack on the *Normandy* at the beginning of the game, destroying the vessel, but not before Shepard gets everyone (except himself) off the doomed spacecraft.

Jettisoned into space from the exploding *Normandy*, Shepard is last seen careening toward a nearby planet, and that is (almost) the end of him. Lucky for Shepard, the Illusive Man pulls together a team of experts to find him and put him back together. This is Project Lazarus. Shepard is the lone subject of a resurrection experiment led by Cerberus, and aside from a few glowing facial scars, it seems to have been a success. Biblical allusions aside, players find out early on that Shepard was indeed in bad shape; Jacob, the chief medical technician for Project Lazarus, tells Shepard soon after he wakes up that for a while he was "nothing but meat and tubes."

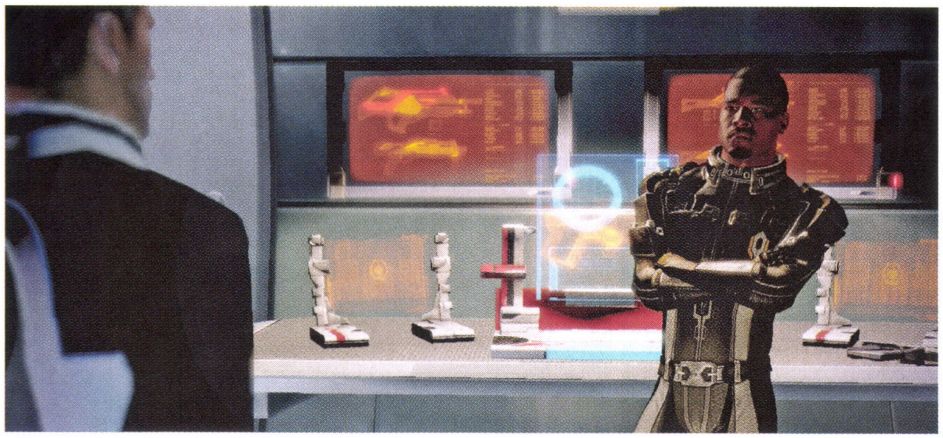
The real brain behind the technical mastery of Project Lazarus is Miranda, who wakes Shepard from his chemically induced slumber as the facility that hosts him comes under attack.

Miranda's motives are in the same gray area as those of the Illusive Man. She masks her decision to work with Shepard with her sultry demeanor but with a clear connection to Cerberus.

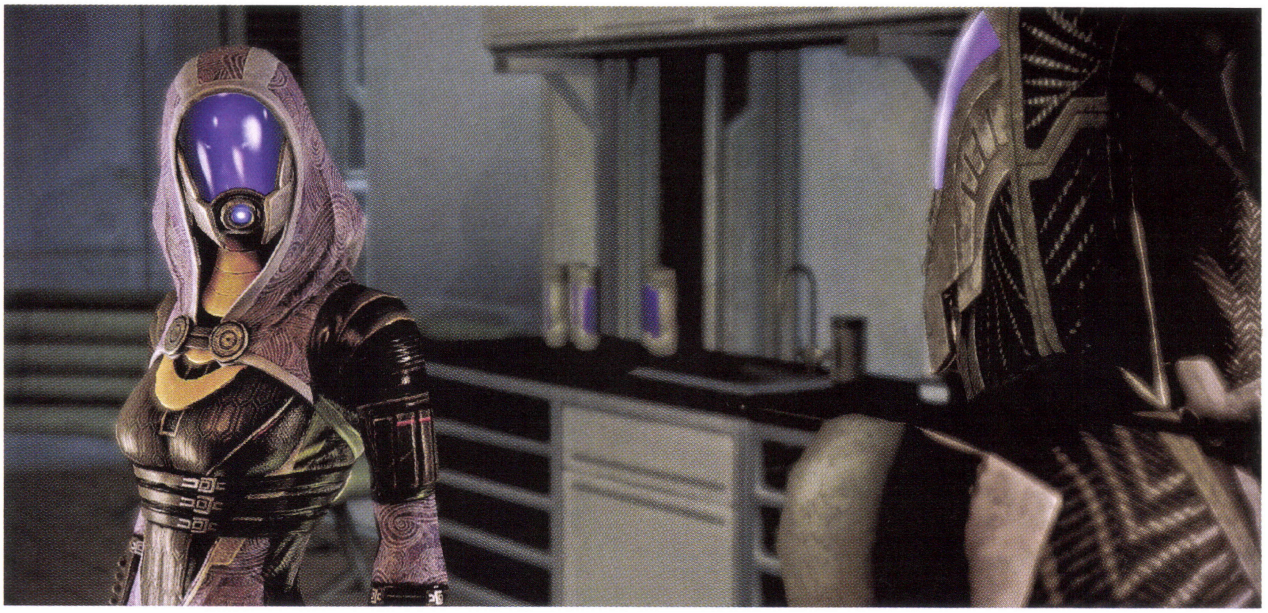
Cerberus Exposed

Led by the Illusive Man, Cerberus stands for the supremacy of the human race and uses any means necessary to reach their goals. Cerberus played only a small role in the first Mass Effect, offering players a brief glimpse into the shadowy organization's cutthroat *modus operandi*. Assaults on Cerberus research facilities in the first game found Shepard face-to-face with not only many of Cerberus' operatives but also their experiment subjects, including genetically engineered abominations based on an extinct insect-like species called the Rachni. The group receives in-depth coverage in the novel *Mass Effect: Ascension*, which introduces both the Illusive Man and Cerberus' plans to make humanity the most powerful race in the galaxy through forceful experimentation projects. In the novel, Cerberus targets Gillian Grayson, a biotic upon which they force illegal medication in order to advance her abilities.

In Mass Effect 2 Shepard must work with this shadowy organization to



"LED BY THE ILLUSIVE MAN, THE GROUP STANDS FOR THE SUPREMACY OF THE HUMAN RACE AND USES ANY MEANS NECESSARY TO REACH THEIR GOALS."



ME2

track down the enigmatic Collectors, a race previously regarded as a myth by Citadel citizens. The Collectors are responsible for an escalating number of both human and nonhuman disappearances throughout the galaxy. As a group that looks out for the human race, it's obvious that Cerberus would want to put an end to the Collectors' actions. But based on their deeds of the past, it's clear that Cerberus are capable of much more—and much worse. In a way the group's principles are analogous with Nazism—that humanity should be the strongest race in the galaxy. That Cerberus adheres to a dangerous form of consequentialism (as Sheen said of the Illusive Man's obedience to the aphorism "the ends justify the means") signifies that the group could ultimately find itself as the most hated enemy of the Citadel Counsel.

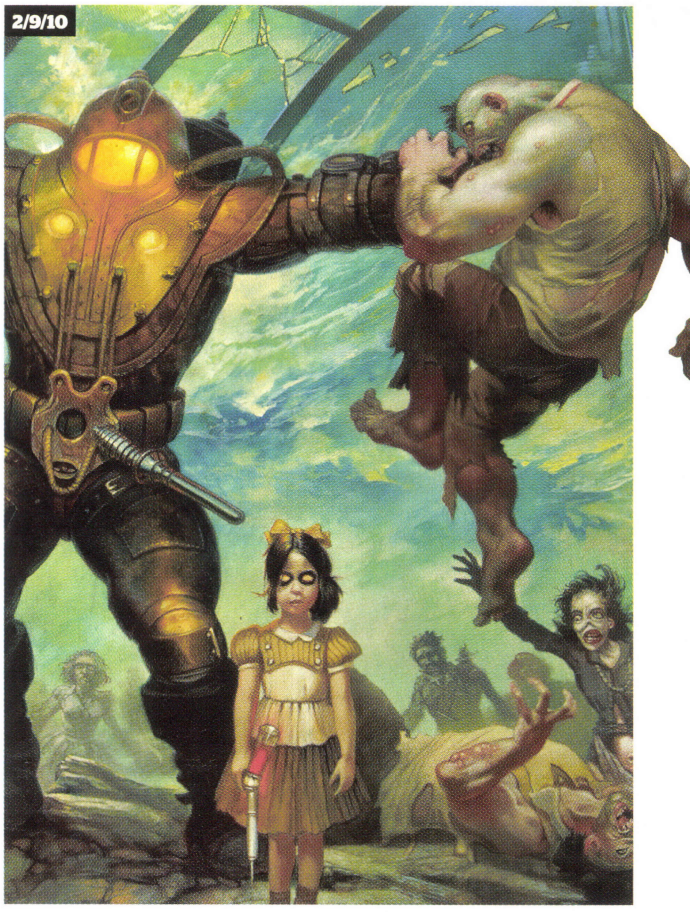
While the Illusive Man is the leader of Cerberus, he acts more as a puppet master. While appearing to be helping Shepard by bringing him back from the dead and giving him any and all resources he needs to track down the Collectors, it's more than apparent that when the time comes when Shepard and Cerberus' ideologies fail to mesh, things will get ugly.

It remains to be seen whether Cerberus has humanity's best interests at heart or if they harbor insidious, xenophobic motives behind their desire to set the human race above all others in the galaxy. Is Shepard saving humanity—or assisting in an ethnic cleansing on a galactic scale?

Harvesters of Flesh

The Collectors are an alien species who call the Terminus System (one of the most dangerous areas in the galaxy) home. In the novel *Mass Effect: Ascension*, the the Collectors would often trade highly advanced technology in exchange for live specimans of certain races. They would also work through agents in order to mask their location from enemies. Their motives for "collecting" remain unknown; speculation in the novel focuses on the use of abducted beings as subjects for the Collectors' genetic experiments. Due to the advanced technology they trade, it was believed that they had a connection with the Reapers, the race of machines led by Sovereign that launched a devastating attack on the Citadel near the end of the first Mass Effect. We're not sure who's facilitating the Collectors' human-harvesting in Mass Effect 2, but it seems clear that we've not seen the last of the Reapers.
—***Andy Burt***

SPAWN POINT



FEBRUARY 2010

It's a packed month for gamer-culture events. Here's what's happening....

(release dates are subject to change)

2/1/10

Lauren Conrad, from MTV's *The Hills*, turns 24 today. She'll no doubt be partying with Rick James, who turns 62.

2/2/10

It's Groundhog Day! Just imagine what a wild party it'll be (over and over again), considering that it's Shakira's 33rd birthday and that the nunchaku-and-soul-brothers flick *Black Dynamite*, starring Michael Jai White (he was Spawn, remember?) and Arsenio Hall, is available on Blu-ray/DVD. Also, Russian-American novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand would be 105 if she were still alive. Why is she important? Her philosophy of Objectivism (introduced in her 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*) is the main inspiration for the BioShock universe. Don't forget to set your DVRs! The final season of *Lost* starts tonight. Did the island really just blow up? What the hell's going on?

2/4/10

Alice Cooper is most definitely not 18 anymore. He's 62 today.

2/5/10

Swiss surrealist H.R. Giger, the man who created the titular alien for Ridley Scott's movie in 1979, turns 70 today. The "H" and the "R" stand for Hans Rudolf. Perhaps he'll celebrate his birthday by going to see the theatrical release of dystopian French sci-fi/parkour sequel *District 13: Ultimatum*.

2/6/10

Guns N' Roses frontman Axl Rose turns 48. Did you know he was born William Bruce Rose, Jr.?

2/7/10

Grab some beers—it's Super Bowl XLIV in Miami.

2/8/10

Robot Chicken funny man and voice of *Family Guy*'s Chris Griffin, Seth Green, is 36.

2/9/10

Dig out your credit cards; it's the first big game-release day of the month. BioShock 2 hits stores today, as does Dante's Inferno and Star Ocean: The Last Hope for PS3.

2/10/10

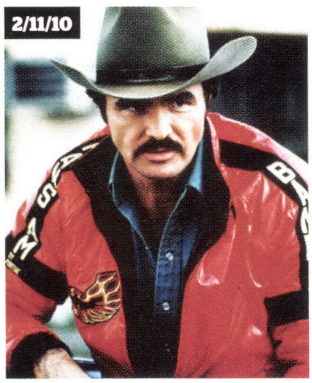
Xin Nian Kuai Le.

2/11/10

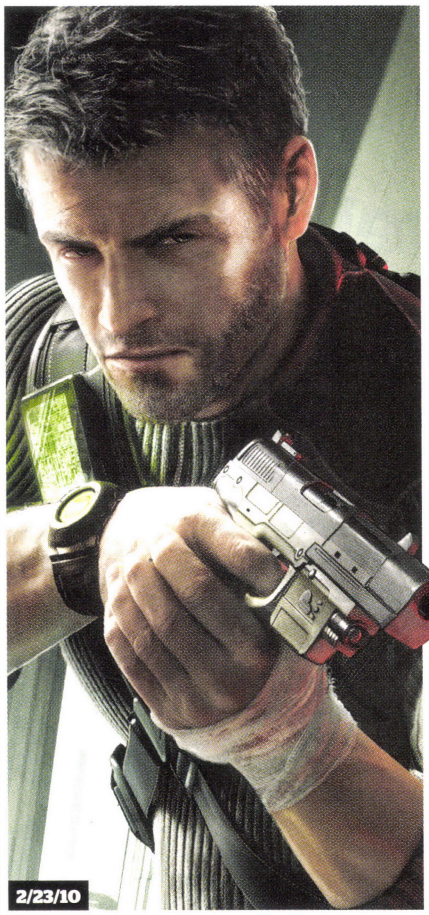
Electric Playground host Victor Lucas shares his birthday with Jennifer Aniston, Sarah Palin, and Burt Reynolds.

2/12/10

A couple of interesting movies debut today—*The Wolfman*, starring Anthony Hopkins


2/11/10

2/12/10


2/23/10

2/24/10

2/26/10

and Benicio Del Toro, provides R-rated werewolf thrills. *Percy Jackson & The Olympians: The Lightning Thief* tells the story of a young boy who finds out that he's the half-human son of Poseidon, and he has to travel across America to save his mom and then return Zeus' stolen lightning bolt while preventing a war between the gods. A pretty typical Friday, then.

2/14/10

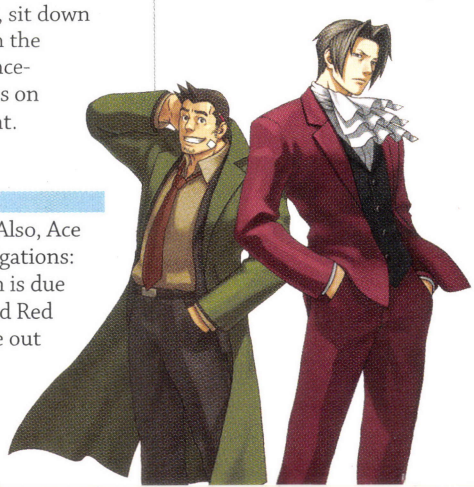
Go buy some chocolates and some flowers; it's Valentine's Day. Failing that, sit down and play through the inevitable romance-themed meet-ups on Xbox Live tonight.

2/16/10

It's Mardi Gras! Also, Ace Attorney Investigations: Miles Edgeworth is due to hit the DS, and Red Steel 2 should be out for the Wii. As we go to press, this is also the rumored release date for Heavy Rain, which was last month's cover story. All this is happening on Ice-T's birthday.

2/18/10

Tommy Tallarico, co-creator, executive producer, and host of *Video Games Live*, turns 42 today. As well as being a noted musician and former host of *Electric Playground*, Tallarico is also the cousin of former Aerosmith lead singer Steven Tyler. Tallarico shares his birthday with he-of-the-awesome-headphones Dr. Dre (45) and Molly Ringwald (42).



2/19/10

The creepy psychological thriller *Shutter Island*, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and Mark Ruffalo, opens today.

2/23/10

Believe it or not, Splinter Cell: Conviction was originally scheduled for release in November 2007. More than two years later, it's finally here, and it looks pretty special.

2/24/10

ModNation Racers, United Front Games' kart racer, hits today, ushering in a wave of user-generated tracks and online multiplayer sessions.

2/26/10

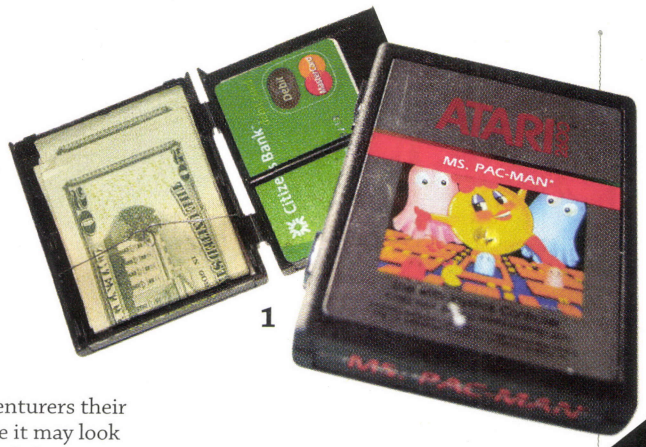
If Levi Strauss were still alive, he'd be 181. Meanwhile, Bruce Willis, Sean William Scott, Adam Brody, and Tracy Morgan star in Kevin Smith's *A Couple of Cops*, a movie about a stolen baseball card. Also, watch out for *The Crazies*, a movie about a virus that makes people...you guessed it...crazy.

2/28/10

Two more M-rated games slip in at the very end of the month: 2K Games' Mafia II and Namco Bandai's Dead to Rights: Retribution. Both offer plenty of violence but with very different themes. You can read more on Mafia II on page 22. G

The Bonus Level

Our guide to essential geek gear.



1

1. Atari Cartridge Wallets

If you grow weary of staring inside a boring leather pouch every time you need to grab a buck, the Atari Cartridge Wallet might be worth slipping into your front pocket. (You're not one of those back-pocket wallet freaks, are you?) Crafted from a gutted Atari cartridge by Etsy seller Niles "NilesZ" Zwolak, these retro-styled wallets can hold a fair amount of cash and up to eight credit cards. He's created a pretty wide range of carts-turned-wallets, from well-known games (Pole Position) to the obscure (Demons to Diamonds).

etsy.com/shop/nilesz

Price: $35-$95

2

2. Peregrine Gaming Glove

Don't let the image to your right strike the fear of the NES's Power Glove in your heart—the Peregrine Gaming Glove might be the savior for keyboard-phobic gamers. Created for games that use keyboard commands (such as MMOs like World of Warcraft), the Peregrine allows you to map any action requiring a keystroke to a series of simple finger movements, like casting a spell by touching your index finger to your thumb or picking up an item by tapping your middle finger on your palm. With the capability to map up to 30 keys to one hand, the Peregrine is even useful for photo editing or typing quick messages.

theperegrine.com

Price: $130

3

3. Four-Hole Teacarina

We've all seen the ads: the androgynous teen standing wistfully in the woods, decked out in Renaissance Faire tights and hair-band eyeliner, limply gripping a The Legend of Zelda–inspired ocarina. If we weren't too busy laughing at this prime example of "When Cosplay Attacks," we would've seen a pretty innovative and fun idea—a quality replica of the Ocarina of Time's reality-altering instrument. But let's be honest: What everyday use could we possibly find for an ocarina? Enter the Teacarina, a fully functioning four-holed ocarina/teacup hybrid. It comes with a fingering chart to help teach aspiring adventurers their favorite Zelda tunes. While it may look classy to sip some chamomile before leaping into the Song of Storms, be sure to empty the Teacarina of any scalding liquids, lest you find yourself conquering the burn ward instead of Hyrule.

stlocarina.com

Price: $22

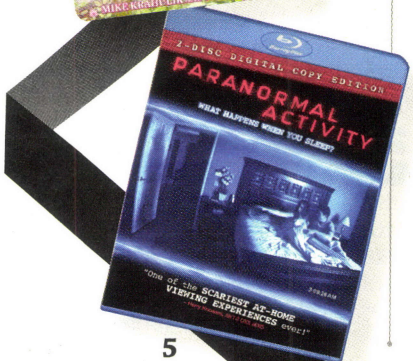
4

4. The Splendid Magic of Penny Arcade

From their wisecracking couch-based beginnings, Seattle-based cartoonists Mike "Gabe" Krahulik and Jerry "Tycho" Holkins have slowly but surely secured their status as Internet icons. With an acclaimed web comic, a prominent children's charity, and one of the biggest video-game conventions in America in the annual Penny Arcade Expo, the Penny Arcade duo have become significant names in geek culture. This 11½-year anniversary collection celebrates all aspects of Penny Arcade's exciting history, featuring never-before-seen content chronicling the comic's creation, a sneak peek at the ever-growing Penny Arcade Expo, and an in-depth series of essays. The Splendid Magic of Penny Arcade serves as a prime reminder of why Penny Arcade always finds its way back to the top of our Favorites tab.

penny-arcade.com

Price: $24


2-DISC DIGITAL COPY EDITION
PARANORMAL ACTIVITY
WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU SLEEP?
"ONE OF THE SCARIEST AT-HOME VIEWING EXPERIENCES EVER!"

5

5. Paranormal Activity

While nothing can surpass the experience of seeing a mysterious horror film like *Paranormal Activity* in a fright-filled movie theater, watching the documentary-style scares in HD is a close second. Made on a shoestring budget of $15,000 but looking every bit as atmospheric and creepy as a blockbuster horror movie, *Paranormal Activity* recalls the indie-fright-flick feel of films like *The Blair Witch Project* or *Rec*. A word of warning—this movie may induce a fear of beds on par with *Psycho*'s shower scares.

paranormalmovie.com

Price: $17 (DVD), $28 (Blu-ray)

GAMEPRO COVERAGE IN YOUR POCKET

TWENTY-FOUR/SEVEN

VISIT:
WWW.GAMEPRO.COM/MOBILE

GAMEPRO WWW.GAMEPRO.COM

THE TIER 1 OPERATOR FEATURED ON OUR COVER AND ON THE BOX ART FOR MEDAL OF HONOR IS BELIEVED TO BE A SPECIAL FORCES OPERATIVE NICKNAMED "COWBOY" WHO HAD PREVIOUSLY APPEARED IN A *LIFE* MAGAZINE PHOTO STORY.

MEDAL OF HONOR REDUX

ELECTRONIC ARTS' GREG GOODRICH AND RICH FARRELLY INTRODUCE US TO A TRIO OF REAL "TIER 1 OPERATORS" AND SHOW US HOW THEY'RE REBOOTING THE MEDAL OF HONOR FRANCHISE WHILE RETAINING ITS CORE VALUES.

~ STORY BY JOHN DAVISON

The rules were made clear from the very beginning. We are not allowed to know their real names. We are to refer to them as Vandal, Coop, and Pancho. We are not allowed to ask them about their unit affiliation, their base location, or their areas of operation. We are not permitted to ask any of them about specific details of any mission. We absolutely must not engage in any kind of political discussion. We must not engage in discussions about killing the enemy. We are not to refer to any specific government agency, and we definitely should not use any of the three-letter agency names when talking to them. We are to refer to any organization that they might be associated with simply as "the U.S. Government." If by some bizarre turn of events we learn their real names, we are not allowed to use them publicly. Identifying a Tier 1 Operator is a federal offense in the United States, punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

Yikes. We are about to meet them.

Just one thing. We cannot record their voices, and they're going to be wearing balaclavas, because we are not allowed to see their faces, either. This information was made briefly more amusing when we were informed that they would be wearing baklava, but this was quickly corrected. Honey-dipped pastries were nowhere in sight.

So begins our brief meeting with three of the mysterious Tier 1 military consultants that Electronic Arts is working with on its new Medal of Honor game.

So, first things first: What exactly *is* a Tier 1 Operator? "There's the president, the joint chiefs, JSOC [Joint Special Operations Command], and then there's us," says Vandal in a gruff voice from beneath his mask. "Tier 1 guys are selected from the best of other sources, like the Rangers or the SEALs," a similarly taciturn Pancho

interjects. "Guys that have made the career move into Special Forces are constantly evaluated based on their reputation," Vandal continues. **"Reputation is everything at this level, and if you meet the requirements, you are invited to participate in the Tier 1 training.** This does not necessarily mean you have been selected.

"I don't like to characterize it as 'best of the best,' but this is a very unique set of individuals. The candle burns a little brighter with the guys that operate at this level. They have a certain drive to continuously evolve as a warrior."

All three men nod in agreement. "I don't like that 'best of the best' description either," Pancho says. "The way I like to talk about it is with a football reference. You have high school and college teams, and then you have the professional league. When you're a pro, you don't make the same kinds of mistakes [as the amateurs]. You're already at a level that means you're expected to perform a certain way."

"It's a very aggressive group," Vandal says. "A lot of alpha superachievers. Guys like Obama, or Kissinger—they're goal-oriented guys; they're superachievers. They look at a situation, and their reaction is that they have to take care of it—immediately. We're from the same mindset."

"We feed on the weak," Coop says, delivering a comment that sounds like he's quoting the awful script from Gears of War. But he clearly means it. "If anyone has any character issues, if they have any weakness, they're out. But that's rare.

"This is also a very cooperative organization. If someone is taken out of the loop, they're immediately replaced by someone similarly talented. You're in it until you prove you can't be anymore. There's never an 'employee of the year' kind of day. In a regular job you can get to the top, but there's nothing like that with this job."

"When you're in a Special Forces unit, there is a very specific chain of command," Vandal explains. "When you're at the Tier 1 level, that changes; it's more of a roundtable approach to decision-making. There's a lot of give and take. We find the best man for the job and just get on with it."

So with all of this in mind, why would such a group choose to work with a video-game company? "Electronic Arts showed us from the beginning that their intentions were very honest," says Vandal, who appears to be emerging as the "alpha alpha," if such a thing exists. "Medal of Honor honors individuals, and we're honoring our community by helping steer things in the right direction. **The last thing we want is something like, I dunno, Jason Bourne,"** he says, his voice growling in a derisive sneer as he utters the make-believe agent's name. **"That's just fiction. We're honoring the people that are fighting and those that have made the *ultimate* sacrifice."**

"It's important to us that people see what we do as being a precision instrument," Coop says. "We're not thugs. We're not assassins. We answer to a boss, like any other part of the military." Pancho stresses how important the concept of being a "precision instrument" is to the Tier 1 Operators. "There's no collateral damage when we're used," he says. "Big military is far less precise; they do lots of damage."

"Missing is *not* an option," a deadly serious Vandal says.

The group continues to explain the differences between the way they operate compared to the procedures of traditional military units. They reveal that while only 10 percent of typical military forces see combat action, the Tier 1 guys *all* see combat. That is their role. They also get to play with a lot more toys than a typical soldier.

"Soldiers are issued gear; **Tier 1 guys *choose* their gear,"** Vandal says. "There's lots of modification and personalization. We have very specific gear for specific jobs: stuff like grips and optics. We also get to try out the new stuff, too, and if it's good, it will eventually trickle down to other units.

"To start with, though, we spend a lot of time trying to see if it will break," he chuckles. "The gear has to be what I like to call 'slick.' I'm a big guy, so I don't want to have stuff hanging off me in a way that could get caught in a doorway or something, so I have a very specific way of setting stuff up. **We put a lot of thought into where we place clips so we can reload quickly."**

These Tier 1 Operators have very specific observations about helping the EA L.A. studio integrating their knowledge and experiences into the game. The first concerns the chatter in the game. **"We're pretty quiet when we operate,"** Vandal reveals. **"We rehearse everything, so if the game were *exactly* the way we work, it would be completely silent.** When we started working with these guys, we had to be in the mindset of 'If we were going to say something, what would we say?' without making the character sound like a jackass, obviously."

When it comes to video games, Pancho says that he plays a little on Xbox 360, but unlike some military units, he doesn't often have time when deployed overseas. "We like games with guns," he says. "We're drawn to this stuff. It must be in our blood or something."

"I can't stand the field of view in games," Vandal says. **"It's so limited, and we rely so much on our peripheral vision.** Sound is important, too. You can hear the way certain guns sound, and there's a lot of muscle memory to firing a gun. When we're playing a game, it can all feel too slow—like moving through molasses."

And with this comment, they're ushered out of the room. We hear later that they had an altercation with building security because the trio refused to sign in and out of the building with anything other than their call signs. We also hear that they occasionally visit the offices to give motivational speeches to the development

THE TECH THAT MAKES MEDAL OF HONOR LOOK SO GOOD IS A HEAVILY MODIFIED VERSION OF UNREAL ENGINE 3. AS YOU CAN SEE IN SOME OF THESE IMAGES, THE GAME FEATURES SOME REALISTIC-LOOKING LIGHTING EFFECTS, AND PARTICLES LIKE DUST AND DEBRIS PLAY AN IMPORTANT PART IN MAKING THE SCENERY BELIEVABLE.

UNLIKE THE "BIG MILITARY" SOLDIERS, THE TIER 1 UNITS INVARIABLY APPEAR IN CIVILIAN GARB AND CHOOSE THEIR EQUIPMENT BASED ON PERSONAL PREFERENCE.

team. In these talks, they stress the importance of character and focusing purely on the work that's at hand.

If you search on Google for "Tier 1 Operator," you won't find a huge amount of information related to the military. And if you start poking around looking for specific details, government representatives are extremely reluctant to comment. Requests for further details for this story were met with silence or strangely irrelevant responses such as "It is our policy that we do not have an opinion on anything." One source did note that his understanding of Tier 1 was that it was a level above SEAL, Special Forces, MARSOC (United States Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command), and Ranger forces and reserved for JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) soldiers.

"Tier 1 is a category," says Greg Goodrich, the executive producer on Electronic Arts' reboot of the 10-year-old Medal of Honor franchise. "It's not a unit designation or a name given to a specific task force. It's a term used to describe the level at which these operators perform and function. It also refers to their place within the national command structure.

"The term 'Tier 1' can also be used to describe a specific unit's ability to carry out missions that require the most highly skilled, proficient, and disciplined group of warriors within the U.S. Special Operations community. There are only a handful of units within the U.S. government that are considered Tier 1, and we have been given the rare opportunity to work closely with members of these units during the development of Medal of Honor.

"This really is a first for us. This is a complete reset of the franchise, and it's the first time we're taking the action out of World War II and into modern times," Goodrich explains, folding his tall frame into a chair in a conference room deep inside the company's Los Angeles studio in Playa Vista. Not only is it the first time that the company has made significant changes to the franchise that Steven Spielberg kicked off in 1999, but it's also the first time that Goodrich and his team have shown the title to anyone outside the studio. This is before the press release revealing that the game will be known simply as Medal of Honor (with no number or subtitle) or its modern-day setting, before the team revealed that it would be the first Mature-rated game in the series, and *well* before the debut of the trailer at the Spike Video Game Awards in December 2009. As such, Goodrich is a little nervous. "I have to keep looking at her," he says, gesturing to a PR representative sitting at the back of the room, "because she throws daggers at me if I say things I'm not allowed to.

"We're approaching this thing from two directions," he says. "It's about big military, and it's about the Tier 1 guys and how those two very different groups intermingle. It's about the sledgehammer and the scalpel."

Before continuing, Goodrich wants to show us a video. "Before we go into the Tier 1 stuff in more detail, we want to show you some footage of the game we pieced together about six months ago," he says as the lights in the conference room dim. "This is all the big military stuff, but it'll give you a feel for the tone that we're going for."

What follows is a moody collection of scenes cut to the appropriately melancholy sound of "Dream On" by Depeche Mode. The sequence begins in the Shah-i-Kot Valley in Paktia province in 2002 in eastern Afghanistan. The valley is southeast of Zormat, and the terrain in the region is notoriously rugged. For years, it's been known as a hiding place for Afghan guerrillas from foreign invaders, and it's these same forces that we see a group of Rangers searching for. *"As your bony fingers close around me, long and spindly, death becomes me, heaven can you see what I see,"* sings David Gahan as the video cuts between scenes that quickly escalate toward a brutal firefight. Soldiers yell to each other. Shots are fired. The scenery is torn apart. Trees are shattered. Walls crumble. *"Unwanted, uninvited kin, it creeps beneath your crawling skin, it lives without, it lives within you."* A helicopter gunship fires rockets, something we see from inside the cockpit from a first-person perspective. Stuff explodes. Dust and smoke billow. *"It sucked you in, it dragged you down, to where there is no hallow ground, where holiness is never found...."* The music is not part of the game, Goodrich is quick to point out, but its tone certainly sets the mood.

The lights go up, and Goodrich springs to his feet, keen to get to what he feels is the real meat of the presentation. "So, you can see that there were a couple of different characters in that video," he says, shooting a glance at the PR rep, who visibly winces as he reveals something he apparently wasn't supposed to. "OK, we're not saying how many characters there are," he shrugs. "Yeah, well, obviously there were at least two in that video, right?" He's on a roll now, so he just goes with it. "There was a U.S. Army Ranger and an Apache pilot in the big military section, and there are multiple characters in the Tier 1 levels, too," he says with a smile. With this we hear the familiar orchestral swell of a PlayStation 3 booting up.

As the game loads, Goodrich explains what we're about to see. "This is a level called Gardez," he says. "It's in an area southeast of Kabul near the Pakistan border, and the Tier 1 guys you're about to see are part of an AFO unit—that's an Advance Force Operations unit. They're going in to get some intel on where Al Qaeda is amassing its forces." He pauses noticeably, waiting for that last statement to sink in. "Yeah, we'll be referencing Al Qaeda in the game," he says. "We're not making anything up."

Before the demo kicks off, Goodrich properly introduces us to his partner in crime, Senior Creative Director Richard Farrelly. "This is Rich," he booms. "He's a very good friend of mine. He and I have worked together, one way or another, for almost our entire careers. We started together at a company called Xatrix, and we did games like Redneck Rampage and Kingpin and Return to Castle Wolfenstein. Then when that shipped, we were acquired by Activision in 2002, and the company changed its name to Gray Matter. I left at that point, but Rich stayed and had been working on Call of Duty games right up until recently, when he decided to come over here with me."

The two began to work in earnest on the new Medal of Honor in late 2008, but the project wasn't entirely new at that point. "There was an idea that was already in progress," Goodrich explains. "[We had] a game in development that was at a point where the organization had said 'Yeah, this is what we'd like to do,' but it wasn't exactly what you see here today. We looked at what was there, and we saw that there were some amazing pieces there. That, combined with the access to the armed services and the Tier 1 guys, meant that it really started to find its direction and get into a good groove."

The level begins with the player and another Operator in civilian Afghan disguises, beards and all, driving through the darkened streets of Gardez in a well-used pickup truck. This is clearly the "Half-Life train ride" section of the level, as the player is not in control of the vehicle. Looking around, many of the buildings appear to be in ruins, and you see little in the way of visible enemy activity. After a minute or so of relative calm, the small talk between the operatives abruptly halts as an exclamation of **"What the f***?" erupts from the player's partner, and the camera snaps to a darkened figure on a rooftop that's aiming a rocket-propelled grenade launcher.** The pace quickens, and the whole scene blurs as the grenade strikes, flipping the pickup truck over and throwing the Operatives to the ground. As the player stands, you hear shouts of "Secure the perimeter!" before all hell breaks loose. Teaming up, the SEALs take cover in a bombed-out building and systematically pick off the Al Qaeda operatives rushing the courtyard. They then move deeper into the town.

Here, they switch tactics to a more considered stealth approach and move into an abandoned building. As the action slows, the A.I. buddy shoots out the lights, and the duo click on their night-vision goggles as the gameplay shifts to something more reminiscent of Rainbow Six. Moving forward, the player takes out a guard from behind with a knife, and the pair move through a series of rooms and up a stairway, systematically eliminating Al Qaeda guards before they find themselves on a rooftop. As they rush forward, trying to find a way to safety, an enemy fighter fires another RPG, and the whole rooftop collapses in a spectacular display of fragmenting concrete and dust.

The demo ends here. "That was the work of 22 guys working for 12 weeks," Goodrich says. "Our production strategy is a little different from other studios. **What you see here is what we call 'stood up.'** For us, that means that the whole thing is about 40 percent complete. It has temp dialogue, temp music, and all the enemies look basically the same. But structurally it's sound.

"Our strategy is that we'll actually have the entire game 'stood up' like this before the end of the year," he continues. "We'll spend the first half of next year making the thing pretty, tightening up the gameplay, finding moments that aren't working and fixing them, and then finding the moments that *are* working really, really well and exploiting the hell out of them. **You have to find the fun. If you sit and make something look pretty and it's not fun, you have to tear it apart anyways.** Better to find the fun first."

As has since been announced, the team at EA's Los Angeles studio is developing the single-player game. **Battlefield developer DICE in Sweden is handling the multiplayer.** "The really cool thing is that in development, a lot of times developers will be really strong in one area: single-player or multiplayer. A lot of times, at least in my experience, you focus on what you're strong at, and the other part becomes an afterthought," Goodrich confesses. "I'm really excited that with this team, our strength is single-player, and we can focus on that. We can tell a compelling, rich story about these characters and their journey through this fight. DICE can concentrate on what they're world-class at. It's like Reese's," he laughs. **"Two great tastes that go great together. Like peanut butter and chocolate. I think we decided we wanted to be chocolate."**

Goodrich and Farrelly are clearly on the same page when it comes to their approach to development, and both of them become visibly more animated as they begin to discuss their approach to putting games together. "Some of the most memorable and joyful moments of my career have been sitting alongside this guy and really giving a s*** about a game and just doing the best we possibly can," Goodrich says.

When it comes to Medal of Honor, both men have found something that they care about deeply. Farrelly, who comes from a military family and spent time in the Canadian military after leaving school, has been a history buff since an early age. Goodrich's fascination with the subject also began in his youth. "I've done a few of these kinds of games," says Farrelly, referring to Call of Duty 2: Big Red One, which he worked on in conjunction with Treyarch, and Call of Duty: United Offensive, the expansion to Infinity Ward's original game, which came out in

UNLIKE PREVIOUS MEDAL OF HONOR TITLES, VEHICLES PLAY A MUCH MORE IMPORTANT ROLE IN THE NEW GAME, AND ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT IN OUR EARLY DEMO IS AN APACHE HELICOPTER. WHILE MANY SHOOTERS SWITCH TO A THIRD-PERSON PERSPECTIVE FOR VEHICLE SEGMENTS, MEDAL OF HONOR RETAINS ITS FIRST-PERSON VIEW FOR THE GUNSHIP ATTACK RUNS.

THE SOLDIERS SEEN HERE ARE FROM THE "BIG MILITARY" SEGMENTS OF THE GAME. THESE GUYS WORK IN LARGER SQUADS. EA'S GREG GOODRICH AND RICH FARRELLY DESCRIBE THEM AS THE "SLEDGEHAMMER" TO THE MORE ACCURATE "SCALPELS" THAT THE TIER 1 OPERATORS REPRESENT.

THE SCENERY IN ALL OF THE AREAS SHOWN TO US IS HIGHLY DESTRUCTIBLE AND APPEARS TO SHARE A LOT OF ATTRIBUTES WITH EA'S OTHER BIG MILITARY CONSOLE SHOOTER, BATTLEFIELD: BAD COMPANY. DOORS SHATTER, WOOD SPLINTERS, AND WALLS CRUMBLE. THE DEGRADATION OF THE SCENERY ADDS TO THE CREDIBILITY OF THE ENVIRONMENT AND MAKES IT SEEM MUCH MORE REALISTIC.

ALL OF THE SOLDIERS IN THE DEMO WE SAW AT THIS EARLY 40 PERCENT COMPLETE "STOOD UP" PHASE CARRIED THREE WEAPONS: A PRIMARY RIFLE, A SIDEARM, AND A KNIFE FOR CLOSE-QUARTERS COMBAT.

A BIG PART OF THE GAME'S AMBIENCE COMES FROM THE DUST AND DEBRIS THAT'S KICKED UP BY ANY AND ALL ACTIVITY. MUCH OF THE ACTION TAKES PLACE IN DRY, DUSTY ENVIRONMENTS, AN AESTHETIC THAT'S HELPED BY THE PARTICLE EFFECTS THE GRAPHICS ENGINE USES.

2004. "That's not by accident. I'm a huge fan of history and military history particularly. It's been a lifelong passion for me, and the fact that I can apply that to my livelihood is a dream come true."

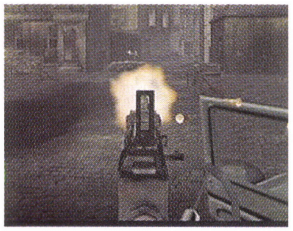
"I really feel that I came into my own in this genre," Goodrich says. "The most enjoyable times of my career have been in this genre or have dealt with military themes. World in Conflict, which was one of my most recent games with the guys at Massive, was a really good experience. We did a really good job with that, because we really gave a damn about it."

Really caring about what goes into a game is something that both speak animatedly about. "For me, when I play a game, there's nothing more that strikes me, or makes me happier, than when I see something that makes me think *they cared*," Goodrich says. "As a developer you can always tell when other developers have really cared about what they're making. Usually these are the ones we all know about. You can just *see it*. The guys at Blizzard say 'Embrace your inner geek'—they care. The guys at Naughty Dog, they care. Insomniac? They care. I could go on and on," he laughs. "The passion really comes through, and the success comes from that. You can see it in an animation, hear it in a piece of music. It can be in something that was just left behind or a corner of a room that you happen to notice. It makes you realize that this designer didn't need to do this in this space because we'd normally just run past it, but he did it anyway because he cared. You can see it in a gag or in an animation. You can feel it and see it, and that's why these games do so well. You may not notice those things up front, but subconsciously you notice them.

"In the film business, they say that the best special effects are the ones you don't realize are special effects. It's the same with these moments. It's just magic."

Goodrich and Farrelly are keen to assert that they care very deeply about Medal of Honor, and that's a big part of why they worked so closely with the U.S. military in piecing together the concept. "The core tenants of Medal of Honor have been the same since the very beginning," Goodrich says. "It's all about respect for the soldier and being an authentic experience. Even though we're in new times, we're sticking with that. That will always be the DNA of this franchise."

"I like what the franchise stands for," Farrelly says. "The commitment to authenticity, and trying to keep that intact, is something I strive to do. Moving forward, I'd love to see the franchise move away from being just American soldiers." Goodrich agrees. "If he and I are allowed to do another one, we've talked about how we'd love to do something where you see more of the international stuff. We want to find that common thread, the warrior's soul that's in these individuals. It's always about the man." G



Medal of Honor: Frontline (2002)
- PlayStation 2/Xbox/GameCube
- Metacritic score: 88

The franchise's fourth game carries something of a misleading title. Despite being called "Frontline," the majority of the missions are actually covert. Frontline sees players again taking on the role of OSS agent Lt. Jimmy Patterson in a story that actually fits between the third and fourth missions of the original PlayStation game. The story concerns Patterson's attempt to steal the prototype of the Horten Ho 229 "Flying Wing" jet-powered bomber as well as the events leading up to the Allied military operation in the Netherlands known as Operation Market Garden in September 1944. Sgt. Jack Barnes from Allied Assault: Spearhead makes a brief cameo.

Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault (2004)
- PC
- Metacritic score: 80

As Pvt. Thomas Conlin, a U.S. Marine in the Pacific theater, players face action at Pearl Harbor, Makin Island, Guadalcanal, and the Battle of Tarawa, making this the first Medal of Honor to tackle battles that took place several years apart. As with all of the other PC and console-based games, Pacific Assault is a first-person shooter, but it also includes one level in which players take control of a Douglas SBD Dauntless dive bomber during a dogfight. This serves as something of a precursor to the helicopter gunship missions in the 2010 franchise reboot.

Medal of Honor (1999)
- PlayStation
- Metacritic score: 92

The original game in the Medal of Honor franchise was a joint project between Electronic Arts and Steven Spielberg's Dreamworks Interactive (which EA later bought and folded into its L.A. studio) and was reportedly intended as a spin-off from the director's 1998 movie, *Saving Private Ryan*. Spielberg received a director credit on the game, which tells the story of OSS (Office of Strategic Service, the wartime intelligence agency that later evolved into the CIA in 1947) agent Lt. Jimmy Patterson as he attempts to undermine Nazi efforts in Northern Europe toward the end of WWII. Medal of Honor, like all but one of the games that follow it, is a story-driven first-person shooter.

Medal of Honor: Infiltrator (2003)
- Game Boy Advance
- Metacritic score: 80

A mission-based shooter bearing a striking resemblance to old-school arcade shooters like Commando, Infiltrator is a Game Boy Advance exclusive that sees players fighting through 15 different levels spread across three different theaters toward the end of the WWII. Though much of the game is a top-down scrolling shooter, it also features some brief first-person segments that involved shooting down enemy planes from the tail gun of an aircraft.

1999

Medal of Honor: Underground (2000)
- PlayStation/Game Boy Advance
- Metacritic score: 86

A prequel to the first game, the 2000 release of Underground sees players taking on the role of French Resistance fighter Manon Batiste, who's loosely based on real-life OSS agent Helene Deschamps Adams, a noted spy who saved American paratroopers from capture at drop zones in France and helped Jewish families escape to Spain. Members of the development team said that they intended the game to feel more intimate and personal than the first, with less emphasis on military organization and more on the grit of underground fighting.

Medal of Honor: Allied Assault (2002)
- PC/Mac
- Metacritic score: 91

The third game in the Medal of Honor series is also the first developed for Windows PCs. It uses the Quake III: Arena engine and simulates infantry combat in the North African and European theaters toward the end of WWII. Players take on the role of U.S. Army Ranger Lt. Mike Powell as he participates in the storming of Omaha Beach on D-Day as well as rescuing OSS comrades from behind enemy lines in occupied France. Two expansion packs supplement Allied Assault: Spearhead, based on Sgt. Jack Barnes (voiced by Gary Oldman), a paratrooper of the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, sees players holding the line near Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge. Breakthrough, the second expansion, stars Sgt. John Baker of the U.S. 34th Infantry Division and tackles the Battle of Kasserine Pass, the turning point of the war in North Africa. It also features the 1943 Allied invasion of Sicily, the Battle of Monte Cassino (also known as the Battle for Rome) in 1944, and finally the landings and the defense of the beachhead at Anzio, south of Rome.

Medal of Honor: Rising Sun (2003)
- PlayStation 2/Xbox/GameCube
- Metacritic score: 68

The franchise switches theaters to the Pacific in Rising Sun, the fifth game in the Medal of Honor series, and to assert this point from the get-go, it kicks off with a frenetic depiction of the attack on Pearl Harbor. As Cpl. Joseph Griffin (later promoted to sergeant) of the U.S. Marine Corps., players must survive the attack before OSS recruits them for missions in Singapore. Rising Sun was originally intended as the first chapter in a two-part story that was to follow both Griffin and his younger brother, Donnie, who'd been captured by the Japanese. The second game, which was to focus on Donnie, was later canceled due to the poor critical reception of Rising Sun.

Medal of Honor: European Assault (2005)
- PlayStation 2/Xbox/GameCube
- Metacritic score: 73

Unlike previous Medal of Honors, the fiction of European Assault is less grounded in reality; John Milius, the screenwriter for *Apocalypse Now*, wrote the story. Originally titled Dogs of War but later changed due to a translation issue (the French term "chiens de guerre" means "mercenaries"), the game takes players to St. Nazaire, France, where they participate in the raids on Nazi submarine pens, before moving to North Africa, the Soviet Union, and finally Belgium. The climax sees players, as hero Lt. William Holt, rescuing Medal of Honor: Underground's Manon Batiste from prison in a Belgian farm.

Medal of Honor: Vanguard (2007)
• Wii/PlayStation 2
• Metacritic score: 56

Vanguard is the 10th Medal of Honor game, and it's the first for the Nintendo Wii. The game casts players as 82nd Airborne Sgt. Frank Keegan and throws him into Operation Husky in July 1943, Operation Neptune on D-Day in June 1944, and Operation Market Garden in September 1944. Keegan then transfers to the 17th Airborne Division before participating in Operation Varsity, a joint British-American assault on Germany in March 1945. Operation Varsity is notable as the largest airborne operation conducted on a single day in a single location.

Medal of Honor: Heroes (2006)
• PlayStation Portable
• Metacritic score: 71

The first Medal of Honor on PSP takes key characters from previous editions of the franchise and casts them in three different campaigns led by Lt. Jimmy Patterson, Sgt. John Baker, and Lt. William Holt from Medal of Honor, Allied Assault: Breakthrough, and European Assault, respectively. In an unusually intimate moment, a cinema after the Battle of the Bulge in 1944 shows Patterson proposing to Underground's Manon Batiste. Heroes also resolves a narrative issue caused by the cancellation of Rising Sun 2 and reveals that Joseph Griffin successfully rescued his brother.

MEDAL OF HONOR TIMELINE

2007

Medal of Honor: Airborne (2007)
• PlayStation 3/Xbox 360/PC
• Metacritic score: 78

The first "next generation" Medal of Honor, Airborne is an Unreal engine–powered shooter that includes insertions in Italy, Northern France, the Netherlands, and Germany. A core element of Airborne's gameplay is the way it inserts players into the action. Rather than simply showing up at the beginning of a level, they drop in from a Douglas C-47 Skytrain (often called a Dakota) and can parachute down to the battlefield. This mechanic means that players are able to affect where they would begin a mission, promoting a less linear experience. As with many other games in the series, Airborne includes segments that tackle Operation Market Garden, Operation Overlord, and at the end of the game, Operation Varsity.

Medal of Honor: Heroes 2 (2007)
• Wii/PlayStation Portable
• Metacritic score: 73

Unlike the first Heroes, which takes its name quite literally and bundles together the heroes of the Medal of Honor universe, Heroes 2 breaks tradition in two ways: It's only about one character, and that character is one that hasn't appeared in any previous games. Heroes 2 is distinct in two ways. It turns out that it's the last game in the franchise set in World War 2, and it supports up to 32 players online.

Electronic Arts published a dozen Medal of Honor titles prior to its re-boot of the franchise and typically focused on specific individuals to highlight their honorable conduct during WWII. All of the prior games take place between 1941 and 1945, with the vast majority concerned with Allied operations toward the end of the war. Medal of Honor games appeared on every major platform since the original PlayStation, with only the DS being left out of the action. Two Medal of Honor games were started but later canceled, to the best of our knowledge. The first was Medal of Honor: Fighter Command, a PlayStation 2 dogfighting title set in the South Pacific that EA canceled in 2001, and the other was Medal of Honor: Rising Sun 2, also for PlayStation 2, which EA canned in 2004.

The majority of the games were well received by the media, but critical reception for the franchise noticeably declined over the years, which led to the suspension of the annual release calendar in 2007 and the eventual reboot. The low point is undoubtedly Medal of Honor: Vanguard in 2007; critics skewered the Wii version for its lack of atmosphere and clumsy controls. The game earned a Metacritic score of just 56. Interestingly, the original game is still the most critically acclaimed, something that new Medal of Honor Executive Producer Greg Goodrich and Senior Creative Director Richard Farrelly are focused on changing.

DIGITAL DISCRIMINATION

BY NADIA OXFORD

As we crawl into the 21st century, humanity still struggles with a problem that's plagued civilization since the dawn of humankind: discrimination. While many societies have made great strides in understanding different races and cultures, people around the world regularly face discrimination based on race, culture, or creed. Death is a frequent result of racism.

Books and film successfully feature serious commentary on these issues, but are video games capable of making their audiences think about discrimination? Is it pretentious for gamemakers and writers to assume that their games' plots and characters can deliver effective, thoughtful commentary on such complicated subjects as prejudice and racism?

Several games prove that the medium is capable of engendering grown-up conversations with gamers. Though their subtlety is sometimes lacking, creators of games are refining their delivery of such messages, and the effort to convey them is stronger than it has ever been.

THE AWKWARD PHASE

Social commentary in video games isn't new. While it isn't the first game to take on important social issues, 1997's Final Fantasy VII, the role-playing game that made Squaresoft as familiar as Nintendo and Sega to gamers in America, focused on messages on poverty, the fragility of the environment, and humankind's usefulness (and uselessness) to the planet. Final Fantasy VII was arguably the first console RPG to reach a widespread American audience, and for many gamers it was their first lecture about morals from a video game.

Unfortunately, a lackluster localization clouded FFVII's message, siphoning much of the power behind the game's statements. It's hard to take something seriously if it reads like a first grader's journal entry on the evils of littering.

Regardless, games from this era helped open a new generation of players to the storytelling potential of games with the help of full-motion video and animated cut-scenes. While you can criticize full-motion video for heralding an age of bloated interludes between veteran warriors who stumble over their lines, console games began to build a soapbox for social commentary.

JEWISH ELVES AND REFUGEES

Despite a shaky start riddled with bad acting and fuzzy video quality, gamemakers put a great deal of effort into building worlds with problems that parallel the troubles of our own. It may sound like a dull venture—we don't play games for reminders of the world's problems—but titles like BioWare's Dragon Age: Origins demonstrate that even a game thick with demons and magic can serve as an effective platform for discussing racially driven troubles in our history.

Dragon Age: Origins allows you to play as a "city elf," and this origin story thrusts the player into the game as a second-class citizen. The elves of Dragon Age: Origins have seen their culture ravaged by outside influences; humans conquered their homelands, forcing the elves to assimilate into human society. Packed into ghettos called Alienages, they live close to the humans who mistreat them. The elves endure injustices such as racial slurs (humans call them "knife-ears") and the crashing of wedding parties as humans exercise their right of the first night. Despite clinging to strong family ties within their Alienages, the elves' traditions and beliefs in their gods are fading. They speak the human language and worship humanity's god. Their elusive forest-dwelling cousins, the Dalish, cling to the old ways and the old gods, a practice the "city elves" view as primitive.

It's clear from the onset that BioWare put more thought into the elven race than what you see in other games and fantasy literature; too many works portray elves as forest dwellers whose distaste and distrust for humanity would never bring them anywhere close to assimilation. Did BioWare draw inspiration from human history in penning the plight of Ferelden's elves?

Absolutely, says David Gaider, the lead writer for Dragon Age: Origins. "A lot of things in the Dragon Age setting are inspired by real medieval European history," Gaider says. "[They're] fictionalized versions of some of the major powers and people in Europe at the time. The plight of the elves is roughly analogous to the medieval Jews; the Alienages are comparable to the Jewish ghettos that existed in places like Prague and Warsaw."

The parallels between the Denerim Alienage and the Jewish ghetto of Nazi-occupied Warsaw go beyond their status as pens for oppressed populations. Despite squalid living conditions, the Denerim elves are a closely knit group and understand the importance of family bonds in a world that largely hates them. The inhabitants of the Warsaw ghetto likewise fought back against disease, squalor, and hunger through education and cultural activities, directly defying the Nazi soldiers who counted on the ghetto's inhabitants cowering until they died of sickness or were shipped off to the concentration camps.

Though the culture of the city elves grew diluted with time,

"THE PLIGHT OF THE ELVES IS ROUGHLY ANALOGOUS TO THE MEDIEVAL JEWS; THE ALIENAGES ARE COMPARABLE TO THE JEWISH GHETTOS THAT EXISTED IN PLACES LIKE PRAGUE AND WARSAW."

—DAVID GAIDER, LEAD WRITER, DRAGON AGE: ORIGINS

'DENERIM ELVES ARE A CLOSELY KNIT GROUP AND UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY BONDS IN A WORLD THAT LARGELY HATES THEM.'

a narrow but strong streak of lore still runs through the Denerim Alienage. These elves value song and dance, and they retain a spiritual connection to the Alienage's "Vhenadahl," a special tree that reminds the city elves of their heritage. Though the uprising in the city-elf origin story doesn't match the turmoil of the Warsaw ghetto, it's clear that many elves are resolved to fight the humans' abuses.

Gaider says that the metaphor works outside of its Jewish and medieval-European inspirations. "The Dalish started off as being analogous to the Rom [the gypsies of Europe]," he says. "Both grew from that point as we accumulated more and more lore. But that's roughly where we began: a people driven from their homeland and forced to live in squalor or as unwelcome wanderers.

"One of our other writers pointed out to me that the analogy works with the Native Americans, and in fact you can probably draw comparisons to many oppressed minority groups in history."

Cultural assimilation is a long-standing concern of minority groups and the majority populations that live with them. The elves' troubles began when they met the human race and adopted their impatient, violent ways. Contact with humans brought mortality to the elves for the first time in their race's history; it became a devastating sickness that eroded their culture and religion.

Square Enix wrote a similarly tumultuous history for the Galkas in Final Fantasy XI. The Galkas also lost their homeland, and they wandered the world of Vana'diel and settled wherever they could. Galkas who settled among humans became a source of cheap labor and received "human" names; this mirrors the fates of many Central, Eastern, and Southern European immigrants and Native American children herded into residential schools in the late 19th and early 20th centuries in the United States.

UGLY FREAKS

Humans aren't always accepting of "outsiders"; Dragon Age: Origins conveys that message, and this sad fact happens even in crisis situations.

The Fallout series takes place in a world ravaged by nuclear war. Bethesda's Fallout 3 is particularly grim and crawling with mutant animals and bandits. "Ghouls," who are people with severe radiation burns, try to live among humans but are typically hated and feared. The ghoul Gob makes his home at Moriarty's Bar simply because he has no choice; the pub's proprietor purchased him from slavers, and the bar's patrons and his master mistreat him. Gob gives the player discounts on food and items if they simply don't mistreat him, let alone show him kindness.

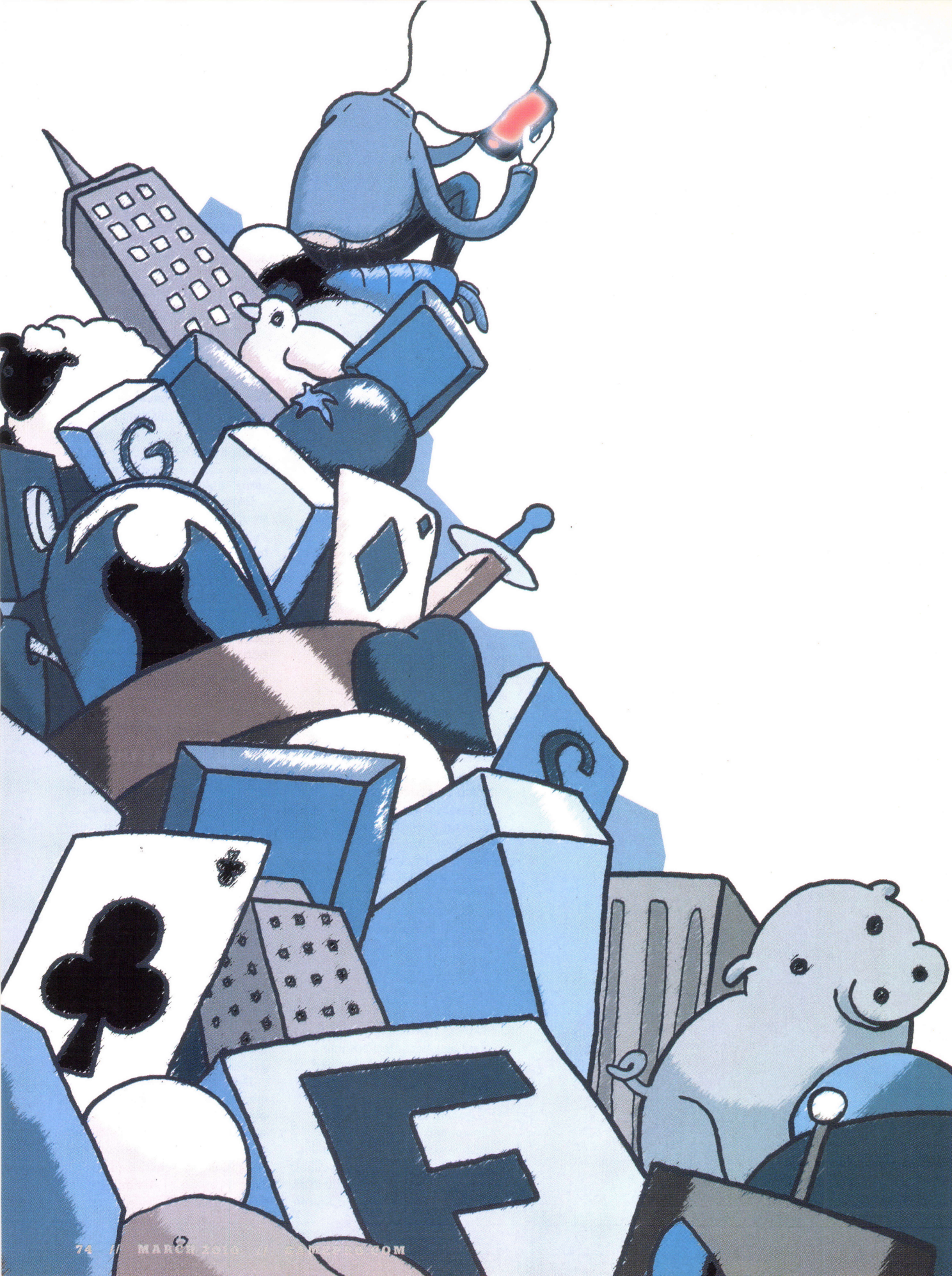
Gob's difficulties, and the troubles ghouls face, have roots in the discrimination suffered by Japanese survivors of the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. Fear of the *hibakusha* and their children still persists thanks to the incorrect notion that radiation poisoning is contagious. *Hibakusha* and their descendants have trouble landing jobs, even if they're not particularly ill or deformed.

SOCIAL FALLOUT

Games such as Dragon Age: Origins and Fallout 3 show that developers are growing more sophisticated in their treatment of social issues, drawing from real examples of human misery to teach us about the ills of discrimination.

Despite this, video games still receive a great deal of criticism as empty entertainment that doesn't add to our culture. And as gamemakers focus more on social issues, they also face a possibly unintended consequence of online gaming—the rampant use of hate speech by gamers in multiplayer games.

Developers believe that games are capable of reaching out to players of any age, race, or creed, and they will continue to use the medium to explore such issues. It remains to be seen if gamers are listening to the messages.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THE RISE OF FACEBOOK GAMING

Facebook game designers, including Sid Meier, talk about developing games for what's become the biggest platform in the world.

By Julian Murdoch // Illustration by Andrew Yang

> At their worst, Facebook games can be pretty light. But at their best, **they create this whole new level of interesting social interactions.**
>
> **—Brian Reynolds**, designer of Rise of Nations, Alpha Centauri

Imagine Facebook's Gareth Davis sitting in Kublai Kahn's pleasure dome rather than an office building in San Francisco. Davis, with an Anglophile's dream of a British accent (think *Doctor Who*'s David Tennant, except Davis's accent is real), is putting Facebook in context.

"Facebook has become the crucible of the new game industry," Davis says without an ounce of hubris or arrogance. "And we're just at the beginning of this new form of game design."

He could go on like this for quite some time, I realize. Of course, as the program manager for games at Facebook, it's his job to do so.

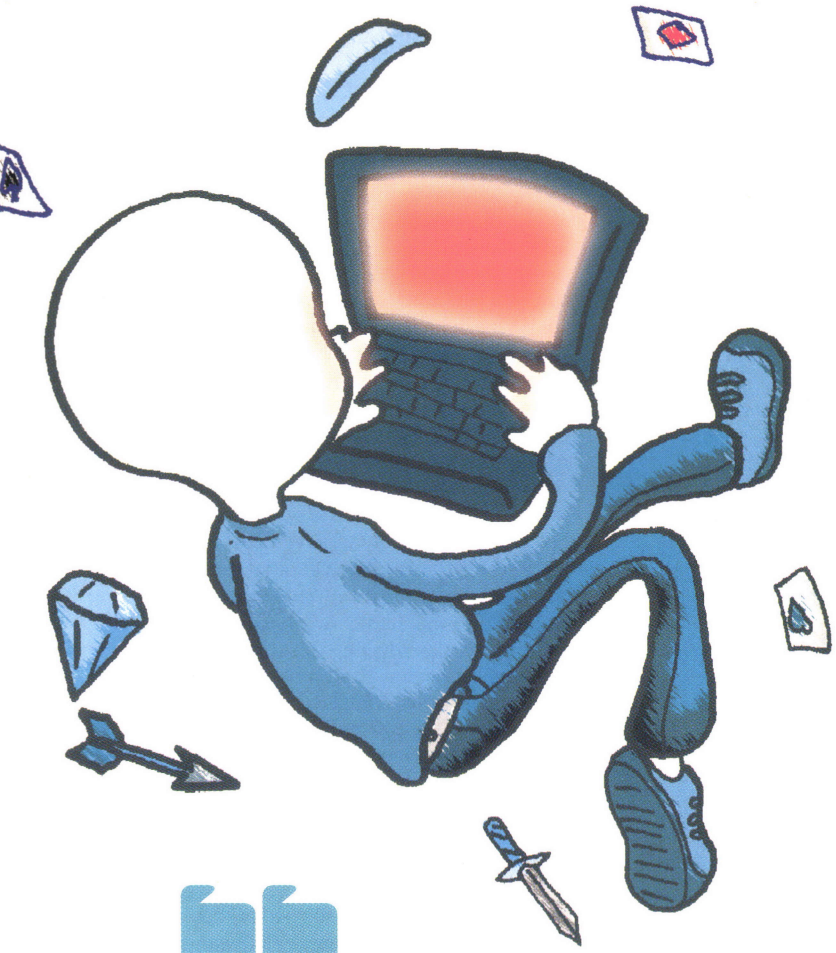
"We're the biggest game platform in the world now."

He's right—no matter how you tally the numbers. More than 350 million people use Facebook every month. More than 100 million of those users play games.

"More people play games on Facebook, every single day, than on any other platform in the world."

Of course, he can't really *know* that. Sony would point out that they've sold nearly 140 million PlayStation 2s. But I give him this one. Gaming is one of the fundamental drivers of Facebook's staggering rise to power. San Francisco–based developer Zynga Game Network claims projected revenues of $300 million a year, and this comes almost entirely from microtransactions in Facebook games. Electronic Arts recently acquired Playfish, another significant player in Facebook gaming, for $400 million. That's more than it would cost to buy triple-A developer THQ—and half the value of Take Two Interactive—as this article goes to press in late December.

But I don't even need to look at the numbers to understand the success of Facebook gaming. I can just look at my couch, where my nongamer wife is adopting a festive reindeer in Zynga's flagship title, FarmVille. She acquired the reindeer from her nongamer mother. She just finished half an hour of fertilizing crops as a favor to a posse of nongamer friends.



> The social games that are getting attention right now are the types of games that are, so far, the **easiest to monetize.**
>
> **—Soren Johnson,**
> designer of Civilization IV

The new face of gaming, Davis explains, is really a return to the social experiences of playing cards and board games.

"All games are social," Davis says. "Solo gaming is an aberration...due to the limitations of technology. What we're seeing now is a rebirth, not a birth. It's gaming getting back to its roots."

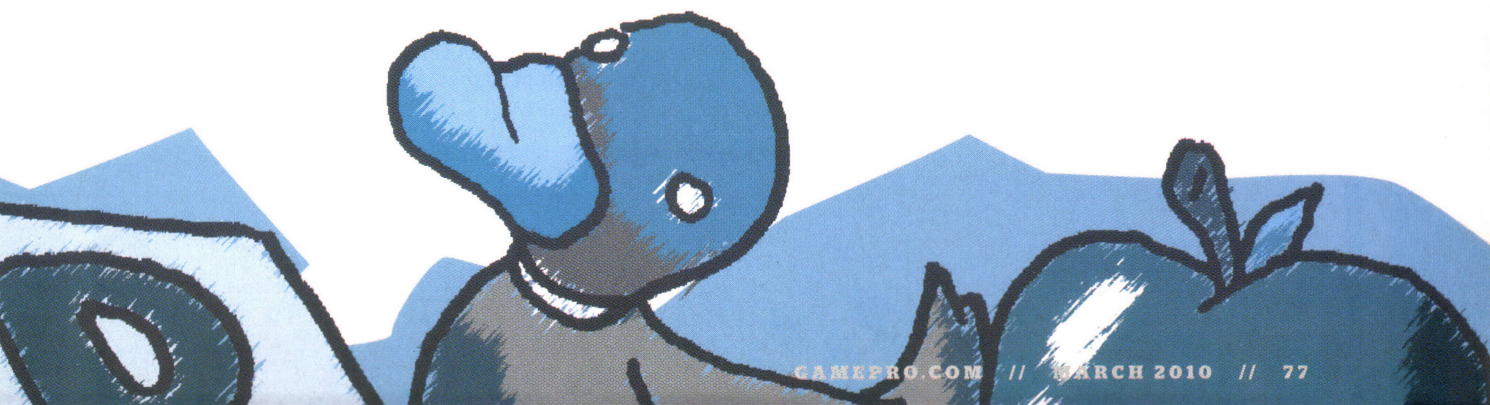
Where I was once proud to wear the nerd-badge of gamerdom, I'm not sure I even know what it looks like anymore. If these are the roots, have I spent the last 20 years in the branches? The countless hours I've played in MMOs or shooting zombies in Left 4 Dead have certainly seemed pretty social to me.

I admit—I haven't taken the whole idea of Facebook games very seriously. FarmVille may have 70 million players, a number that dwarfs World of Warcraft's "mere" 11.5 million players, but those WOW players pay more than a hundred dollars a year to play the game. How much are all of those FarmVille players paying?

Not much—they're shelling out a dollar here, and a dollar there to fuel their virtual tractors or buy bigger plots of land. But "not much" multiplied by tens of millions of players across dozens of games adds up to piles of money—and these piles have grabbed the attention of some of the most successful hardcore game designers in the business.

Zynga's Brian Reynolds was one of the first to emigrate from major game-studio development to Facebook gaming, leaving Big Huge Games and his legacy (Rise of Nations, Alpha Centauri, Civilization) behind last June. Oddly enough, a number of strategy-game designers—a genre that ranks among the most hardcore of gaming experiences—are powering the rise of Facebook gaming.

"For better or worse, the market for hardcore strategy seems to have gone away," Reynolds says. It's a depressing prospect, but it's one borne out by dwindling sales numbers. Hardcore strategy games have been absent from the top-10 lists at retailers for years. So Reynolds looked for where the action was, and he found it. "It's a real business when you can get 10 percent of the country to play your game...that's an exciting place to be. So that's where I am."



> Is playing FarmVille playing a game? Or is it something to do **between checking your e-mail and reading the *New York Times*?**
>
> **—Sid Meier,** creator of Civilization

The "where" in this case is a new Maryland studio built around Reynolds—Zynga East—staffed entirely by triple-A development veterans. They haven't officially discussed their projects yet, much less released a game. But they have been learning the ropes by helping iterate Zynga's ever-evolving stable of games. "It's definitely a different world, but a lot of the same, basic game-design principles apply," Reynolds says. "At their worst, Facebook games can be pretty light. But at their best, they create this whole new level of interesting social interactions." He's quick to point out that Zynga's not building a new Rise of Nations for the Facebook generation. "I don't think Facebook games are ever going to become traditional hardcore strategy games. Not the ones that are driving this new market."

Soren Johnson isn't so sure. A fellow Civilization alum, Johnson left Firaxis after completing Civilization IV as lead designer, arguably the best version of that long-standing franchise. He went on to work with Will Wright on Spore before starting on a set of browser-based strategy games, still under the EA umbrella, likely to end up on Facebook.

"The social games that are getting attention right now aren't necessarily getting attention because they're good games or bad games," Johnson says. "They're getting attention because these are the types of games that are, so far, the easiest to monetize."

He thinks real opportunity exists for better, deeper games. "There's a larger question from a game-design point of view: What else is possible in this giant, new space? There's a lot more that's possible, and we're just at the beginning." Indeed, as hardcore strategy games declined in sales, strategy players naturally turned toward the web for their fixes, making games such as Travian and Ikarium popular before Facebook gaming was even on the map. "This is going to mean something for every genre," Johnson says. "And it's definitely going to mean something for strategy games, which is why I'm interested in it."

That sense of potential, of being on the ground floor of something really interesting, seems endemic in the small cadre of designers focused on the next generation of Facebook games. Even Studio Director Henrique Olifiers of Playfish, already a leader in social gaming, thinks all of the games to date have been nothing but a prelude. "Judging social games by the current state of affairs is a little

bit dangerous," Olifiers says. "The games we have now aren't the games we'll have in a year's time. It's all new."

But what will those games look like? Will they be traditional strategy games with a social twist? Will designers simply create more score-chasing virtual-arcade games, like PopCap's Bejeweled Blitz? "I haven't seen a silver bullet, a genre-defining social game," Olifiers says. "But I think it will come soon—something that changes the landscape completely—as soon as designers start figuring out the deeper emotional drivers when players engage with specific mechanics. We can explore things more with trust. Things can be much more collaborative when you are playing just with people you trust. Nobody's done it yet."

This opportunity for deep, meaningful collaborative experiences is what's brought Sid Meier, the godfather of modern turn-based strategy games (Civilization, Colonization, Alpha Centauri), to Facebook. Meier has jumped in with both feet, announcing that his next project for Firaxis is Civilization Network, a massively multiplayer, free-to-play persistent version of the franchise.

"The killer app in Facebook gaming is cooperative play," says Meier, who seems giddy to be playing in the social sandbox. "That's the secret sauce." Meier agrees with Facebook's Davis that single-player gaming is essentially a result of technological limitations. "Civilization always felt like a huge experience; it's all of civilization, for goodness' sake. That's got to mean a lot of people, right? But we had 4,800-bps modems, so it was pretty hard to get a co-op experience."

And Meier insists that this shouldn't water down the brave new world of Civilization. "The experience gets blurry. Is playing FarmVille playing a game? Or is it something to do between checking your e-mail and reading the *New York Times*?" he asks with a chuckle. "Our idea is not to try and make another Facebook game but to make Civilization for this new technology. This is a new arena, a new playspace, and we're still learning. We're trying something new and not trying to fit an existing genre of Facebook games."

At age 55, Meier seems like a kid who's just received the keys to the candy store. "It's a lot of fun!" he says. "We've got cool stuff going on, and we've got some dreams. So wish us luck." G

"GAMER" GAMES ON FACEBOOK

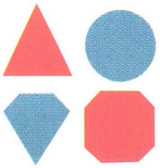
Not interested in growing soybeans or raising chickens? Try some of these Facebook games.

Warstorm

(Challenge Games)
apps.facebook.com/warstorm
A collectible card game à la Magic: The Gathering in Facebook clothes but with achievements and automated 60-second battles.

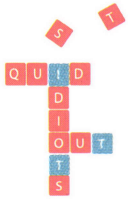
Crazy Planets

(Playfish)
apps.facebook.com/crazyplanets
It's like Worms with robots.



Bejeweled Blitz

(PopCap)
apps.facebook.com/bejeweledblitz
It's Bejeweled with trash-talk. How can you resist?

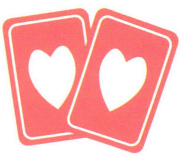


Bananagrams

(Large Animal Games)
apps.facebook.com/bananagrams/
Think *Scrabble* without a board and on a deadline.

Ponzi

(Challenge Games)
apps.facebook.com/ponzi_inc/
Think of it as "Cubicle Tycoon": the strategic thrill of ordering copy machines and 10-year-old PCs. Honest.



Texas HoldEm

(Zynga):
http://bit.ly/7IxGsh
Better than most online poker games but with real fake money instead of fake real money.

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Re-views

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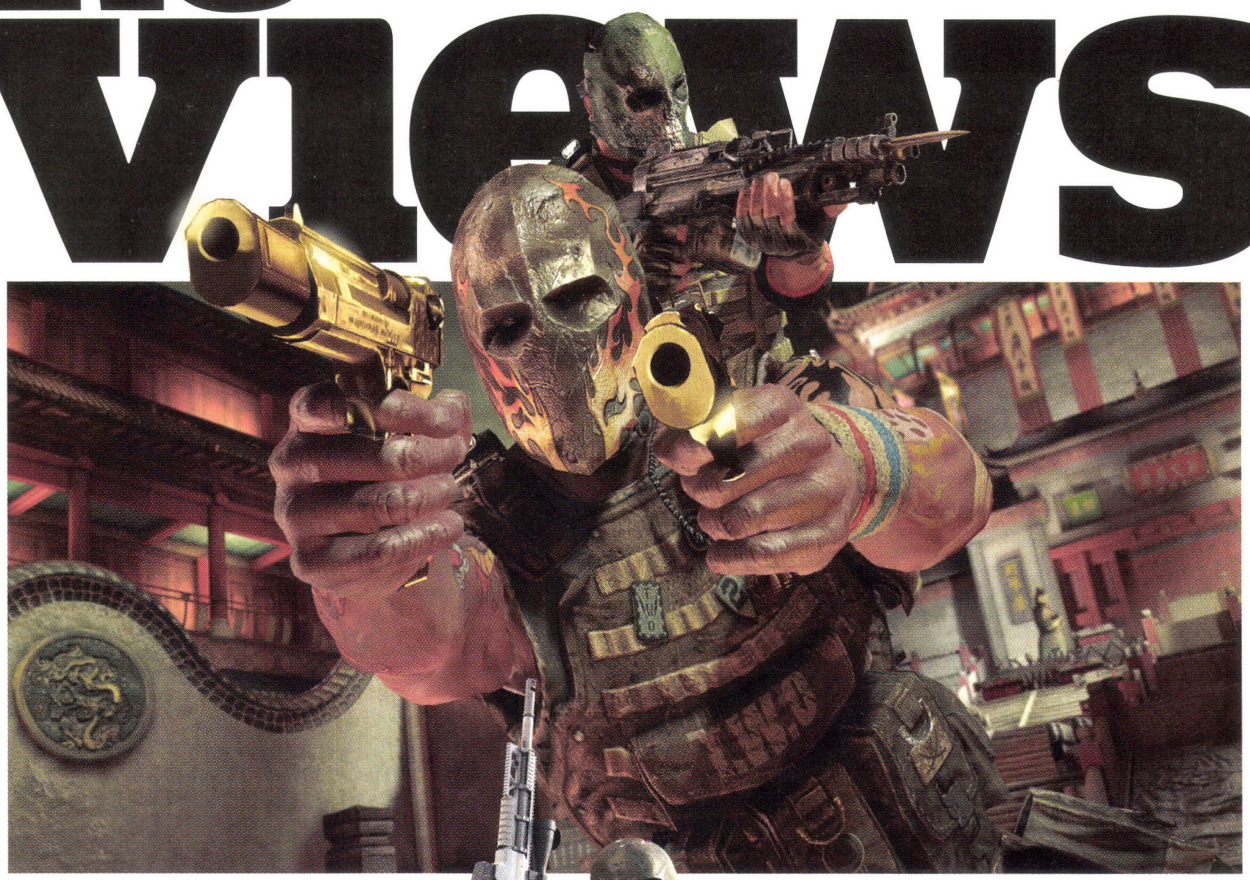

Army of Two: The 40th Day

And on the 40th day, EA created a competent yet unexciting sequel.

Xbox 360

- **Developer: EA Montreal**
- **Publisher: Electronic Arts**
- **ESRB: M**

EA designed The 40th Day, like the original Army of Two, from its inception as a co-op experience. While it's possible to play the game solo, the game's clearly designed for two players to battle it out together. So with that in mind, we created our own "Army of Two"—reviewers Andrew Hayward and Mitch Dyer—and gave them their marching orders. A full debriefing on their experiences follows.

Andrew: Before starting The 40th Day, Mitch and I popped in the original Army of Two and played a fair chunk of it online to refresh our memories of Salem's and Rios' undying bromance and ultraviolent adventures abroad. While the online co-op experience is still entertaining, I find the game to be bland, and the numerous flaws in the gameplay still jump out at me.

Mitch: I didn't like Army of Two much to begin with, and playing it again to prep for the sequel made its flaws stand out even more. At the time of its release, Army of Two tried to latch on to the Gears of War craze, but the inaccurate and unresponsive shooting compromised the already painfully linear stop-and-pop shooting galleries. On top of that, you deal with a forgettable story and two detestable sociopaths masquerading as heroes. To my surprise, The 40th Day addresses almost all of these issues—something every sequel should aspire to do but doesn't—yet the game feels like it's struggling to keep pace with the genre.

Andrew: It's interesting that you mention Gears of War as an influence on

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Army of Two: The 40th Day features "morality moments" where a life-and-death choice must be made, but the outcomes carry no emotional weight.

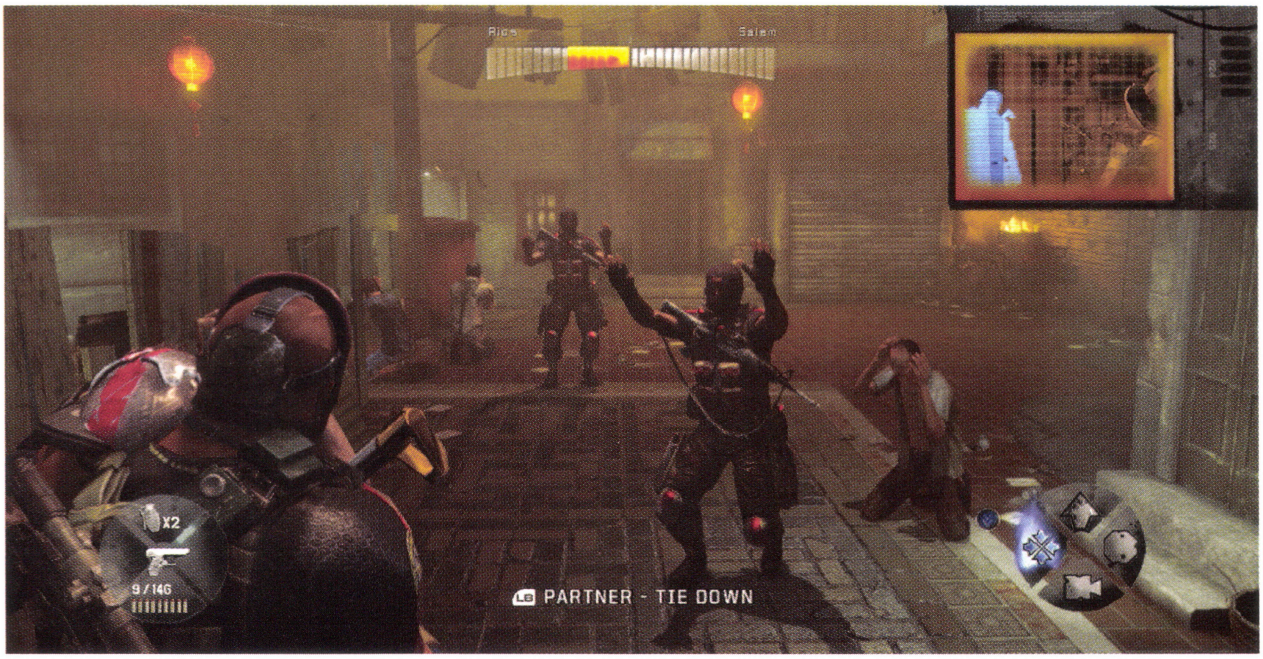
the original Army of Two, because The 40th Day feels like a response to Gears of War 2 in some ways—notably the new running and melee mechanics as well as the Extraction multiplayer mode. While The 40th Day is an improvement over the original, when you compare it to the current crop of shooters, it's lacking. Whether it's the routine—and essentially repeated—encounters, the complete disregard for narrative and character development, or the multifaceted frustrations of the co-op experience, The 40th Day just doesn't live up to the genre's high standards. But it sure starts on a strong and memorable note.

Mitch: Man, that opening level is fantastic. Salem and Rios duck into Shanghai on a quick mission to earn some money, but they unknowingly become pawns in a terrorist plot. Shanghai is completely obliterated because of their actions, and the consequences make for exciting set pieces. The scenes where a plane crashes into the building you're trying to escape from and a skyscraper topples over while you're inside—those are some incredibly exciting moments. The ruins of Shanghai open up a lot of interesting level-design opportunities. Enemies also use the open and vertically designed areas to full advantage, forcing us to communicate, coordinate, and cover each other. But as we progressed through the game, that terrific sense of teamwork devolved into a repetitive routine. Rather than remaining a strategic element, debris becomes nothing more than a means of funneling you down strict and narrow pathways while identical enemies pop out from the same spots to take shots at you. Even hostage situations and "morality moments" become predictable and rote.

Andrew: I get what they're trying to do with the hostage scenes. They not only test your ability but also your conscience. Do you run up behind the leader and grab him, forcing his subordinates to surrender? Should we coordinate our sniping or just fire indiscriminately into the mix and see what happens? It's disappointing that the outcome of these decisions doesn't have much of an effect on the game. Sure, you pick up some funds and receive a morality bonus for saving lives, but it has no tangible effect on how the actual campaign unfolds.

The same holds true for the game's "morality moments": Several times throughout the game, you make what are often life-or-death decisions. Once you make your choice, the game cuts to a montage of hand-drawn still images that depict the eventual outcome. Unfortunately, the results are uniformly miserable, and that they have no actual bearing on the game makes them all the more meaningless. We played through them multiple times to see both outcomes, and your choices don't seem to dramatically change the rest of the game.

Mitch: Not only are the outcomes of these moments pointless, but they're also repulsive. It rarely has a moment where you can make a "good" decision because the consequences are almost invariably awful. If you let a rapist have his way, he shoots his intended victim dead; if you save the girl, she shoots up a hospital. The 40th Day's main narrative is just as terrible: I had *no idea* what was going on until the second-to-last chapter. It took the game 5 hours to show us a villain, and I never got the impression that he had any sort of grand ambitions. On top of that, nothing is behind the game's subtitle beyond the nondescript "40th Day" propaganda posters scattered about the city. If you reference something in the game's subtitle, shouldn't that actually play a role in the game? The story is lifeless, and your objective is simply to shoot everyone in front of you until the credits roll.



Teamwork makes all the difference and can turn a potentially dangerous situation into something you can handle.

Andrew: I found the lack of attention paid to the "40th Day" to be strange as well. If it's important enough to put in the subtitle, it should've been a major focus of the game, not a throwaway reference. You can piece together tiny morsels of meaning from the various audio logs that you find scattered around and from the morality moments, which typically involve otherwise inconsequential characters. But otherwise, the whole thing seems irrelevant. The narrative also does nothing with Salem and Rios; they're not people so much as they are characters. Their "personalities" consist of high-fiving and mugging for the camera on the menu screen before killing dozens of people in each mission.

Mitch: While the story is lackluster, the action segments are decent. Like the original, most fights take place in linear settings, but periodic open-area encounters create multitiered paths for you and your partner to take. Either way, you have plenty of enemies to mow down, with the occasional heavy shotgun or flamethrower tossed in for variety. The aggro system from the original is back and injects a bit of strategy into the firefights: While one player unloads hot lead into enemies and attracts attention, the other can snipe or sneak with little repercussion. And even though we lost an obscene amount of progress due to poor checkpoints and difficulty spikes, I still had a good time popping melons with Desert Eagles and stabbing chumps with bayonets. But to bring back a point we both made earlier, The 40th Day seems dated. If the game had come out a few years ago, it would've been great. But in 2010 it's just another competent copycat.

Andrew: But at least the game is a step up from the original. It's got a much better control scheme, improved aiming, and more flexibility in how you tackle scenarios. If you're here strictly for the action or you just couldn't get enough of the original, you'll likely find The 40th Day to be worthwhile. The weapon customization is one thing the game still excels at; it draws a bit from the series' off-base sense of humor and lets you equip things like soda-can silencers on tiger-striped assault rifles or toss diamond-encrusted grenades. And you can now tweak your arsenal at any time, even during a mission, so it's easy to quickly use your in-game earnings to inject a little style and personality to the combat.

Mitch: The humor is something I enjoyed a lot more this time around, especially because Salem and Rios are a bit more likable. Instead of spouting stupid frat-house one-liners like "Ladies, lift your shirts!" they reference *Die Hard* and, perhaps best of all, play "Rock, Paper, Scissors." It's strange that something as trivial as a throwaway minigame captivated us as much as it did. We spent time after each encounter engaging in a celebratory best-of-three. Considering the hours we spent retrying some of The 40th Day's ruthlessly taxing battles, I think we earned those sanity-saving Rochambeau duels.

Andrew: Amazingly, The 40th Day is a whole lot less frustrating when playing with an A.I. partner, which in some ways runs counter to its co-op nature. The game is far more difficult with a human partner, and the game's faulty checkpoint system penalizes you unfairly for dying: You often lose several minutes of hard-fought progress every time you die. On the upside, the partner A.I. is really solid this time, and the ability to direct your partner on the battlefield and when performing co-op moves is a fantastic addition. Still, I think I'd rather play co-op, since speaking to, and working with, a pal engenders a sense of teamwork far better than tapping in commands for an A.I. teammate.

The game offers a terrific amount of weapon-customization options, and best of all, you can access the menu at any time to use them.

Mitch: Grinding through a gauntlet of deadly accurate enemies can be grating, but it feels great to take down a hulking, grenade-launching powerhouse with the help of a buddy you don't need to babysit. But I wonder if I'll continue playing The 40th Day now that our review assignment is over. The game has its moments, but it didn't do enough to convince me to abandon the other games that I'm playing.

Andrew: I'm not sure I will spend much more time with the game, either, though the multiplayer modes may tempt me to do so. I like Warzone, which cycles in a new objective every couple minutes—kill the VIPs, steal the intel, etc. Surprisingly, I think I enjoyed Co-Op Deathmatch the most. Sure, it's just a free-for-all among five teams of two, but the two-player dynamic really draws me in. Extraction is essentially a slightly modified take on Gears of War 2's Horde and Halo 3: ODST's Firefight modes, and while it doesn't seem mind-blowingly original, it's probably pretty exciting on higher levels with some close friends.

While The 40th Day has its moments, it just isn't consistent enough to keep my attention.

Mitch: It's an all-around decent experience, but it's nothing special

Andrew: Honestly, the "Rock, Paper, Scissors" minigame is the thing I enjoyed the most about it. If only it had that as an online playlist—I might have rated it a lot higher.

Mitch: You and me both, bro.

★★★

PROS: Improved partner A.I. and controls; solid multiplayer modes; addictive "Rock, Paper, Scissors" minigame.
CONS: Co-op can be frustratingly difficult; checkpoints are few and far between; very thin narrative; morality choices have little consequence.

A Failure to Communicate

During our online co-op play, we experienced an unsettling number of session-ending disconnects. We're fairly confident that the issue is software-related and isn't a symptom of hardware malfunctions, as these problems didn't affect our Xbox Live party connection. Because we were using prerelease reviewable code, we can't be sure if the issue was in the code or is in the retail version. Our fingers are crossed that EA addresses the problem before the game hits retail.

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★

War's horse, Ruin, is one of the few things that doesn't immediately smack of imitation, and the game handles the beast particularly well.

Darksiders

Anything you can do, I can do (but not) better.

Xbox 360

- **Developer: Vigil Games**
- **Publisher: THQ**
- **ESRB: M**

True to the spirit of its name, Darksiders has been lurking a bit in the shadows. Unlike the heavily promoted Dante's Inferno and Bayonetta, two other titles clearly "influenced" by God of War, Darksiders hasn't tried to cultivate the same sort of marketing buzz, and that will, ironically enough, help it get *more* attention simply because gamers won't feel obliged to immediately dismiss it as a blatant knockoff. It *is* a blatant knockoff, of course, but the word hasn't really gotten out yet. Whether this under-the-radar approach is on purpose or not, it's a smart move to hide this fact for as long as possible. Darksiders isn't a bad game by any means—in fact, it's surprisingly decent—but it's mimicry of other games is so unabashed that it cheapens its overall quality, to the point where it's a bit hard to swallow. It's like watching a stand-up comedian who has a killer routine composed entirely of trademark jokes stolen from other comedians—it's entertaining, but you spend most of your time picking out who "influenced" the material.

Darksiders is a mishmash that draws deeply from a variety of other titles already on the market; it's like a "greatest hits" package of game concepts and features elements of God of War (the biggest influence by far), Devil May Cry, Halo, and surprisingly, Portal. One of the game's designers bandied about that The Legend of Zelda series was a better analogy for the game, and while fundamentally the two are the same—an initially powerless hero visits various dungeons, kills a bunch of monsters, and accrues enough power to eventually take on a final threat—spiritually, the two are worlds apart. The Zelda franchise has always possessed a sense of child-like wonder and focused on the thrill of adventure; Darksiders, on the other hand, tries to be more "serious" and has an action-movie vibe. Besides, the game itself makes no bones about what its influences are, so it's a little ridiculous for someone on the development team to suggest otherwise; they might have had that intention, but the final product speaks for itself, and it's blatantly clear where the inspiration truly came from.

> "In an admittedly interesting twist, the devs also drew inspiration from some unexpected sources and implemented those ideas in a surprisingly deft fashion."

Let's face facts: The game is basically God of War with enough cosmetic changes to keep the copyright lawyers at bay. It copies the formula right down to the glowing chests full of colored health orbs, and as a result the whole thing feels incredibly derivative. They make clever use of what they borrowed, but even a little bit of innovation would've been nice, if only to give the impression that the developers did something other than put a bunch of games through a copy machine. Darksiders doesn't do anything new, and that isn't a crime so much as it is a shame, especially when you consider the source material's

potential. You'd think that a game based on the apocalypse and one of the Four Horsemen would give the developers some breathing room to try a few things, but all they managed to do was squeeze out a long-winded story about betrayal and biblical intrigue that lacks any sense of cohesion or tension. It presents absolutely no impetus for the Horseman War's quest and no driving force that gives meaning to his actions; say what you will about Kratos' ill-fated mission, you at least feel like he has a valid reason for being pissed off.

War, on the other hand, gets thrown into the middle of a grand conspiracy, but he muddles his way through to the end with no real sense of purpose. The developers tried to build a story with epic implications—at one point, all of humanity is wiped out—but it has absolutely no sense of weight or consequence: You move from one level to the next, kill whatever is put before you, and keep going until the credits roll.

But as much grief as it deserves for being a copycat, Darksiders still manages to be worthwhile, mostly because the developers had enough sense to steal from the best. Think about it this way: Even though it lacks the cachet and quality of the original, a counterfeit Rolex can still tell you what time it is, and Darksiders delivers just enough enjoyment that you want to see it through to the end. The action is spread out over a large, well-designed overworld; you come to possess a wide variety of weapons and tools that actually prove useful. War eventually gains access to a large number of satisfying combo moves and powers. The graphics are decent, and the controls, while unnecessarily complicated at times, are also tight and responsive enough to give you a real sense of command over the action. As I said, it's hews true to the God of War template.

But in an admittedly interesting twist, the devs also drew inspiration from some unexpected sources and implemented those ideas in a surprisingly deft fashion. You get a sidearm that basically turns you into Dante from Devil May Cry; you receive access to some portable heavy weaponry that works exactly the way turrets work in Halo; toward the latter part of the game, you can create two-way dimensional wormholes that are the key to solving a series of well-designed environmental puzzles. But as clever as these touches are, they're also carbon copies of the originals: The way War hefts a turret is identical to the way Master Chief would, right down to the over-the-shoulder camera view, and the portals you create are orange and blue, just like in Valve's classic first-person-puzzle title.

And that's Darksiders' biggest fault: It completely ignores the opportunity to improve upon what already exists. Rather than try to move the genre forward, they just recycled pre-existing concepts; it's incredibly lazy game design, and while it's unfair to expect Vigil Games to reinvent the wheel, it also isn't too much to ask that they contribute something new to the process either. This is my biggest disappointment with the game: It has enough potential that I'm sorry to see it go to waste.

I liked Darksiders enough that I'm going to recommend that gamers try to look past the shameless cribbing of ideas and discover the relatively worthwhile action experience hidden underneath. But I also hope that the developers will put more effort into the inevitable sequel and make it something more than a derivative also-ran. The idea behind the franchise has enough merit that it deserves a better effort, and it's lamentable that they didn't realize that from the very beginning.—***Tae K. Kim***

★★★½

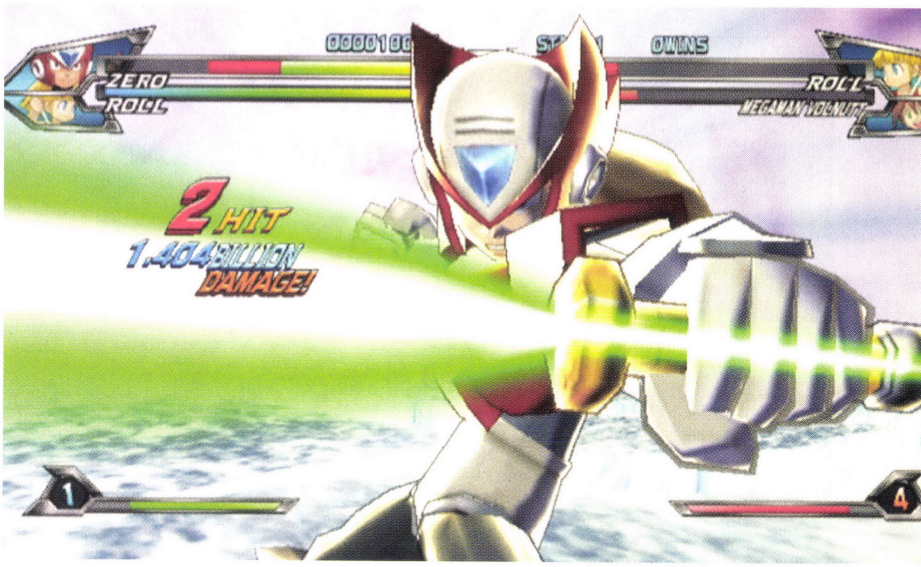
PROS: It's a surprisingly decent repackaging of elements from other games; the use of portals is especially well done.
CONS: It brings absolutely nothing new to the table, and as a result it feels incredibly derivative.

Tatsunoko vs. Capcom: Ultimate All-Stars

A stellar lineup stars in Capcom's latest fighter.

Wii

- **Developer: Eighting**
- **Publisher: Capcom**
- **ESRB: T**



Characters such as Dead Rising's Frank West and Mega Man's Zero provide a nice sense of familiarity in a roster of unfamiliar characters.

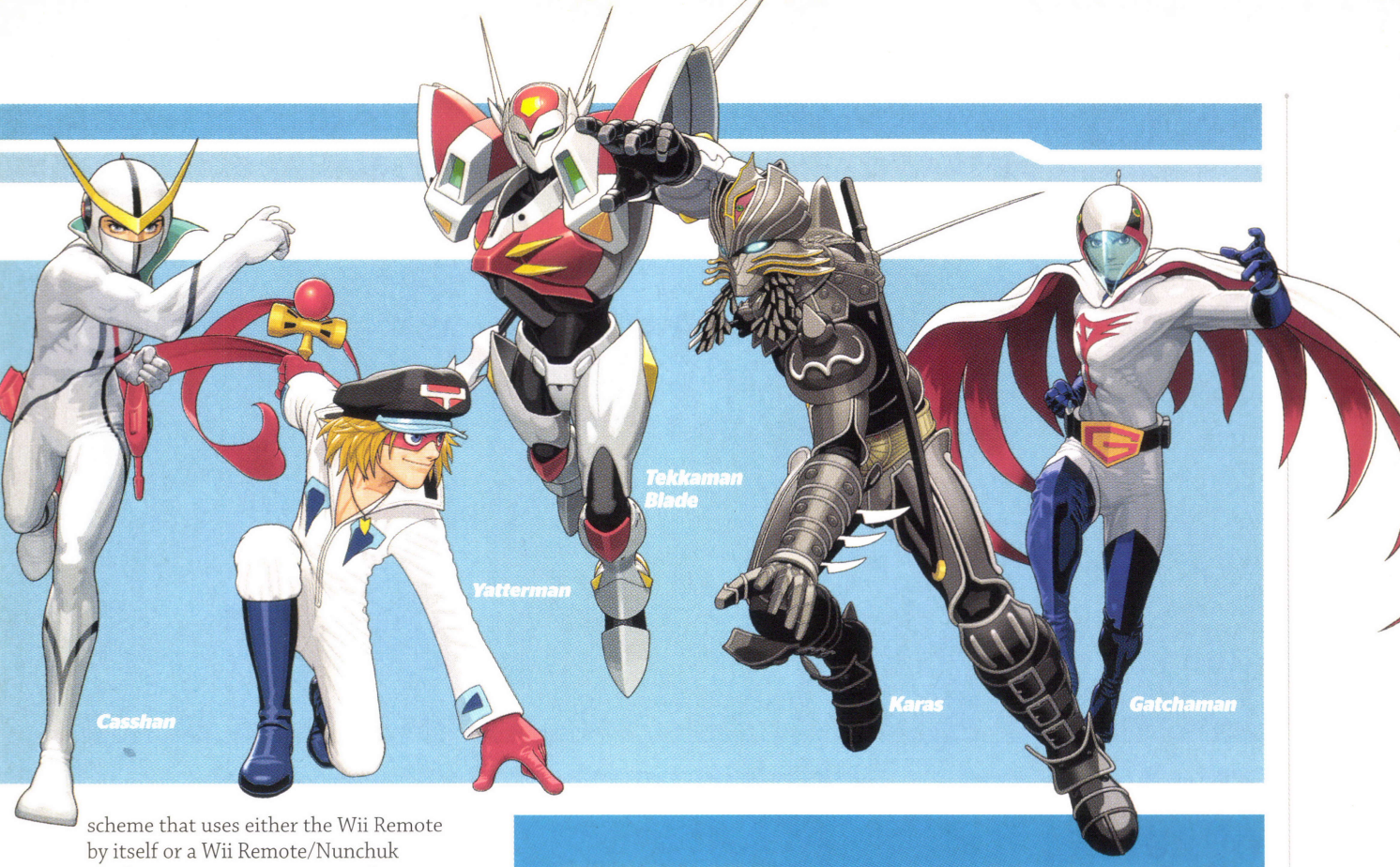
As the first new "Versus" title to appear in a decade, Tatsunoko vs. Capcom has quite a legacy to live up to. While the Street Fighter franchise is the stallion in Capcom's fighting stable, the Versus series has its own dedicated fanbase, owed in large part to the success of the Marvel-branded titles. Tatsunoko is interesting, however, because it represents a rather large gamble on Capcom's behalf: It abandons the now familiar three-on-three matches in favor of the two-on-two tag-team formula of earlier titles, and perhaps most significantly, it features an intellectual-property partnership with Japanese animation studio Tatsunoko, whose assorted heroes are popular overseas but lack the cultural cachet of Marvel's spandex squad here in the States. You also cannot discount that the game is a Wii exclusive; Nintendo's console isn't exactly known for fighting titles.

Those used to the frenetic pace of Marvel vs. Capcom 2 will also find that Tatsunoko is considerably more subdued. The two-character limit dramatically cuts down on the amount of chaos that appears onscreen, but the quick tempo and the superpowered scale of the attacks still makes it considerably faster than Street Fighter IV, which is to Tatsunoko what Monopoly is to Hungry Hungry Hippos. The pace doesn't make the game more difficult, however: Much like the other Versus titles, combos and special/supermove links are much easier to pull off, making it a novice-friendly fighting experience. In fact, because of the Wii Remote's relatively simplistic nature, the controls have become incredibly streamlined, making it even easier to pick up and play. Rather than distinguishing between discrete punches and kicks, Tatsunoko simply has a light, medium, and hard attack, along with a "Partner Call" button. Techniques seen in the previous Versus titles also make a comeback, including partner-support attacks and team-up supers, but it also has some new twists, including the "Baroque" skill that eliminates recovery time from attacks and a "Mega Crush" that can stop a lengthy combo dead in its tracks.

Tatsunoko really benefits from the long-running nature of the franchise; Capcom's had enough time to perfect its technique, and their expertise really shines through. But I found myself enjoying Tatsunoko considerably more than the recently released Marvel vs. Capcom 2 for one reason in particular: the characters and their skills. Every character in Tatsunoko has a "hook" that makes them interesting, be it Doronjo's ability to keep striking while her henchmen execute her special moves or the massive PTX-40A's unstaggerability and sheer attack power. Unlike Marvel versus Capcom 2's "throw everything at the wall and see what sticks" roster of fighters, every combatant in Tatsunoko feels carefully designed to be distinct, intriguing, and most importantly, worth investing time to master.

Unfortunately, the relative unfamiliarity of the characters will no doubt be a sticking point for some. Even the Capcom characters are oddities if only because they're brand new to the world of fighting; characters like Frank West from Dead Rising and Zero from Mega Man are immediately familiar, but they've always existed in a context that has nothing to do with 2D fighting, and there's sure to be a moment of disconnect, no matter how brief, as gamers acclimate to their new roles. I'm also disappointed that the game forces you to unlock some of the characters by "beating" the single-player mode multiple times, an unnecessary hurdle that requires a fair bit of grinding to get over.

Also, while the game does have a lot to offer, it simply doesn't display the same level of depth and strategy as some of Capcom's other offerings—the pared-down movesets for each character mean it doesn't offer as many offensive or defensive options as, say, Street Fighter IV. That has a lot to do with the simplified fighting engine, which in turn was no doubt influenced by the Wii's control scheme. The standard Wii Remote just isn't suited to fighting games because of its lack of buttons and their disjointed placement. You can use the Classic Controller, a GameCube controller, or a Wii/GameCube joystick for "tournament standard" controls seen in other 2D fighters, but these options require an additional purchase and will really only make sense to gamers who plan on investing copious amounts of time in the game. It also has a "simplified" control



scheme that uses either the Wii Remote by itself or a Wii Remote/Nunchuk combination—executing special moves becomes as easy as holding the D-pad in a single direction and hitting a "special attack" button—but this dumbed-down scheme feels awkward and restrictive. Despite its relative ease and economy, it's hard to create advanced combos, and I can't imagine it would appeal to anyone—not even novice players. As with any fighting game, Tatsunoko will no doubt work best if it's used in conjunction with a quality fighting stick.

While Tatsunoko vs. Capcom isn't nearly as deep or as "technical" as Capcom's other offerings, it is still an excellent fighting experience, especially for Wii fighting-game fans, who don't have a wealth of options. It's fun and enjoyable, and the variety in its roster of fighters is definitely a highlight. I'm eager to play with friends for quite some time, and I'm happy it's getting a Stateside release. I hope other genre fans will pick it up and enjoy it as well: My Morrigan and Yatterman-1 team is itching for some competition.—***Heidi Kemps***

★★★★

PROS: Diverse roster of characters; fast and fun combat; lots of bonus content and fan service on both sides.

CONS: Wii Remote/Nunchuk controls feel very awkward; many unfamiliar characters; you need to unlock fan-favorite fighters.

JUST WHO ARE THESE GUYS, ANYWAY?

Tatsunoko's anime characters and heroes have a lot of clout in Japan, but many of them are virtual unknowns here in the States. Here's some background on a handful of the more obscure members of the cast and their origins.

Casshan: This is a story of a cyborg warrior and his mechanical dog, Friender, protecting humanity against a robot rebellion called the Andro Army. *Casshan* (sometimes translated from Japanese as "Casshern") saw its 1970s TV run followed by a 1993 series of direct-to-video animation episodes, a 2004 live-action movie, and a 2008 TV anime remake called *Casshern Sins*. The 1993 series is available as *Casshan: Robot Hunter* on DVD from ADV Films.

Tekkaman Blade: One of the more recent series in the game, this '90s anime follows the exploits of Takaya, a.k.a Tekkaman Blade, as he works with the Space Knights to fend off the invading forces of the Radams and their evil commanding Tekkamen. You may have seen the edited adaptation of this anime as *Teknoman* on UPN several years back. Both the unedited *Tekkaman Blade* series and the *Teknoman* re-cut are available on DVD from Media Blasters.

Karas: This series follows the exploits of ex-Yakuza-turned-supernatural protector Otoha as he protects an alternate-universe incarnation of Tokyo's Shibuya district from otherworldly threats. The newest Tatsunoko property represented in the game, *Karas* was conceived as the studio's 40th anniversary project and makes interesting use of 2D and 3D animation in visually stunning action sequences. It's available on DVD from Manga Entertainment.

Yatterman: Teenage robotics genius Gan (Yatterman-1) and his girlfriend Ai (Yatterman-2) use their wits and a host of mecha to defeat the bumbling minions of the Doronbo Gang—Doronjo, Tonzura, and Boyacky. This comedy/action anime originally aired in the late 1970s, and its enduring popularity earned it a TV-series remake in 2008 as well as a 2009 live-action film adaptation from acclaimed Director Takashi Miike. While the series is unavailable in North America, you might find some fan translations online.

Gatchaman: Often considered Tatsunoko's flagship creation, this '70s anime series follows the exploits and drama of the avian-themed heroes, Science Ninja Team Gatchaman, as they fight the extraterrestrial threat of the Galactors. This series appears under several names and edits/adaptations, including *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*, but ADV Films released it in its original format on DVD as *Gatchaman*.

The locomotive is an interesting addition and provides a speedy solution to the problem of long-distance travel.

Spirit Tracks needs more unique elements to stand out from The Phantom Hourglass.

The Legend of Zelda: Spirit Tracks

A solid portable addition to the Zelda mythos.

DS

- **Developer: Nintendo**
- **Publisher: Nintendo**
- **ESRB: E10+**

The Legend of Zelda franchise has been a gaming staple for decades, starting with Link's glorious debut on the NES. Although the culture of gaming has undergone dramatic changes over the years, Zelda remains relevant by staying true to its core values of epic storytelling, interesting characters, and vibrant worlds.

But the true secret of Zelda's success is how Nintendo fully leverages the power of its consoles to move the franchise forward: A Link to the Past used the SNES's 16-bit capabilities to create a large, vibrant world full of colorful sprites, and The Ocarina of Time brought Zelda into the 3D realm thanks to the N64's more powerful hardware. More recently, Twilight Princess, originally a GameCube title, used the Wii's motion controls to good effect and helped prove that they could work for games more complex than virtual bowling.

Spirit Tracks, the latest portable Zelda title, continues the tradition of taking full advantage of its respective platform: You scribble on the DS's touch screen with the stylus, play a flute by blowing into the mic, and attack enemies by smacking them on the touch screen.

The game also offers a deep experience, and while the sense of challenge is minimal, it has a number of engaging and fun tasks, such as rabbit collecting and train improvements, to unearth. Traveling around the world in the locomotive is also a unique solution to the problem of long-distance movement. The game handles this well, a good thing considering train travel is the major distinguishing "feature" that helps separate Spirit Tracks from the rest of the Zelda series.

It's an eccentric yet utterly enjoyable game, but it also suffers from a few issues that keep it from reaching the high bar set by other Zelda titles. The initial pacing is rather poor. The first 2 hours introduce the world's back-story—it's inhabited by people who have been fending off a demon using railroad tracks—and this requires a ton of reading, a problem the DS's relatively small screens exacerbate. To add to those early pacing problems, a limited set of actions handcuff the players, specifically during the train-driving portions. While this is all in line with the genre convention of gradually rewarding progress, Spirit Tracks would have benefitted from a much more compelling introduction to counteract the slow narrative.

When the game does start to pick up, it plays very similarly to The Phantom Hourglass. While this isn't necessarily a problem—Phantom Hourglass is a great title, after all—it would've been nice to see more innovation applied to the overall gameplay; aside from the unique modes of transportation, little differentiates the two. I also noticed a very kid-friendly vibe to the title—an idea that solidified when I dispatched a smiley flower monster with a leaf pinwheel—and while it fits the overall spirit of the game, it might also alienate older gamers who may have grown up with Zelda but whose tastes have matured past the cute and the cuddly.

Spirit Tracks does enough things well that you won't regret persevering through the initial sluggishness. Once the game picks up momentum, it packs a locomotive-sized punch, one that doesn't innovate but still manages to represent the franchise well. ***–Aaron Koehn***

★★★★

PROS: Makes good use of the DS's capabilities; offers a deep experience with plenty to do.

CONS: Game drags in the early going; doesn't innovate much beyond The Phantom Hourglass.

Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey

Mature themes make this DS adventure both interesting and disturbing.

DS

- **Developer: Atlus**
- **Publisher: Atlus**
- **ESRB: M**

While lesser enemies are usually nothing more than a prelude to boss battles, even minor foes present a good sense of challenge in Shin Megami Tensei: Strange Journey.

The latest Shin Megami Tensei title certainly has an appropriate name: Strange Journey is a *strange* game for two reasons: It's a Mature-rated DS title, which is exceptionally rare, and it's about a futuristic multinational army that ventures to an Antarctica-like dimension to stop an impending demonic takeover of planet Earth. Strange Journey earns its "Mature" rating not through blood and gore but by dealing with themes and story elements that could potentially make gamers feel very uncomfortable, something that's part of the franchise's reputation. The Shin Megami Tensei series also delves into various mythologies, and depending on the choices you make during your time with Strange Journey, you might even end up fighting the holy armies of the Judeo-Christian God (yes, the Biblical God, not some metaphorical figure). Strange Journey is a refreshingly thoughtful experience compared to the plots of most Japanese role-playing games, but it's not for the easily offended.

The game's odd premise is also a departure from the established norm, and it centers on a soldier who leads the expedition as he explores the ice caves and hellish mockeries of human-made locales that compose the strange world. Everything plays out in a first-person perspective, similar to Atlus's Etrian Odyssey series, and along the way, you can actually communicate with and recruit demons to join your team as well as augment their powers and fuse them into more powerful fighters. You also make several moral decisions over the course of the game that determines which ending sequence you unlock.

Exploration of the varied dungeons throughout Strange Journey is exciting, and the strong enemy encounters force you to think carefully about risks and rewards when going into uncharted territory; it's a nice change from RPGs where nonboss encounters are nothing more than cannon fodder meant to bolster your experience level. While the turn-based combat engine is standard fare, recruiting and creating powerful demons and crafting parties that work well together gives the game a lot of strategy. One thing that disappoints me, however, is the demon fusion system: The previous DS entry, Devil Survivor, has an excellent "helper" utility that provides assistance in finding and planning various demon fusions. This utility isn't present in Strange Journey, and it's sorely missed—you'll either have to commit the statistical information to memory, invest a lot of trial and error, or seek out a FAQ.

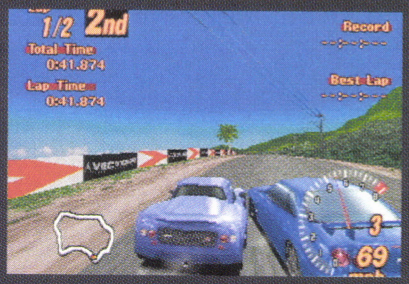
The other big issue for me is a matter of personal preference. While the "futuristic military" theme is one that hasn't been seen much in the SMT series (or Japanese RPGs in general), it's so widespread in other gaming genres—particularly here in the West—that I was bored with it almost from the get-go. Some players will certainly appreciate the break from fantasy kingdoms and teenage anime heroes, but I like the "modern-day Japan" settings of SMT titles like Persona and Devil Survivor much more than this.

But while Strange Journey has its issues, it's still a solid game, and it's one of only a handful of titles on the DS that truly is meant for mature audiences. If you're looking for a thoughtful, challenging RPG experience, this is a Strange Journey worth taking; those who take issue with the thematic elements, however, might want to go adventuring elsewhere.—***Heidi Kemps***

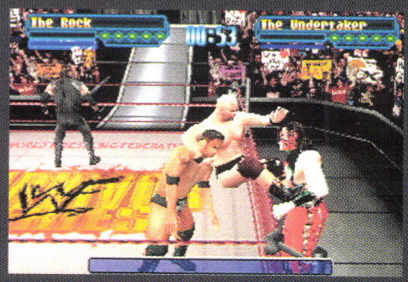
★★★½

PROS: Intriguing and mature story elements; lots of areas to explore and hidden secrets to find.
CONS: Demon fusion takes trial and error; thematic elements may offend some gamers.

A look back at March 2000 and *GamePro* #138



Gran Turismo 2



WWF SmackDown!

"The Rock says..."

We thought we were nuts to put sweaty grappling men on the cover of *GamePro*'s August 1998 issue, but after stellar newsstand sales, we didn't hesitate to make the WWF our central image...again... and again...and again. For the 152-page March 2000 issue, we went with the wrestlers a fourth time with WWF SmackDown! Although it was the first WWF game published by THQ, Smackdown! received a developer well versed in creating games based on the sport in Yuke's—gamers in overseas markets consistently regarded their titles as the best in the genre. Yuke's Power Move Pro Wrestling even came to the U.S. in 1997 courtesy of Activision.

Acclaim, the previous publisher of the WWF games, had a spotty track record with the license; their focus was on hitting the shelf quickly instead of producing a quality product. But THQ and Yuke's made the franchise respectable with a speedy and deep combat system that didn't rely on button mashing. The visuals in SmackDown! were better than in previous WWF titles, too, and featured the unorthodox practice of using hand-drawn wrestlers rather than motion-captured grapplers. Professional wrestling arguably will never achieve the legitimacy of other pro sports, but Yuke's and THQ at least put some quality behind the WWF brand.

Second lap for Gran Turismo

Sony's second offering of the prized Gran Turismo racing franchise, Gran Turismo 2, received the highest Fun Factor score in the issue with a 5.0. GT2 also got a top score for Control but fell short in Graphics and Sound (3.0 and 4.5, respectively). Reviewer Air Hendrix scorned the visuals: "Excessive pixelation and lack of detail give the tracks a primitive, artificial look." Planescape: Torment (PC) received top scores in all categories except Fun Factor, where it made due with a 4.5. Other games in the 4.5 Fun Factor camp were Mario Party 2 (N64), Ridge Racer 64 (N64), and Road Rash: Jailbreak (PlayStation). It was a generous month for reviews as no game scored below a 3.5 for Fun Factor. Consumers had slim software pickings on the shelf in March; the most notable releases were Thief II: The Metal Age (PC) and Need for Speed: Porsche Unleashed for PlayStation, Game Boy Advance, and PC.

Let's do launch

Sony released the PlayStation 2 in Japan early in the month for ¥39,800 (approximately $370). One of Sony's objectives with the PS2 was to create an all-in-one media machine, and aside from the game-playing capabilities that made the unit the most advanced console available, the PS2 also had a built-in DVD player. This Trojan horse feature gave consumers a perceived sweet bonus, as they could watch DVD movies—a video format that was quickly replacing archaic VHS cassette tapes. The PS2's backward compatibility with PlayStation games didn't hurt its allure, either. The initial PS2 shipment quickly sold out, and units auctioned on eBay fetched final bids that easily topped $1,000. Even though U.S. gamers had to wait seven months for the unit, Sony's second-generation console would have a one-year head start on Nintendo's Dolphin (renamed GameCube) and Microsoft's Xbox, which both debuted domestically in November 2001 (sadly, Sega would discontinue its floundering Dreamcast that same month).

But Sony's successful PS2 Japanese launch wasn't without attempts to steal its limelight; Microsoft wowed audiences at the Game Developers Conference with tech demos of Xbox software. Despite a butt-ugly "X"-shaped hardware prototype with an "X-Box" working title, the tech demos impressed—especially the video of a hail of Ping-Pong balls falling on a floor covered with mousetraps. Microsoft head Bill Gates himself ran the demos: "Why will it be successful?" he asked of the hardware platform. "That's simple. It will have better games." The accuracy of that boast is endlessly debatable, but Microsoft was prepping a launch that would become one of the biggest franchises in video games today. It was from the developer of the real-time-strategy series Myth and the upcoming PS2 action game Oni—Bungie Software's Halo: Combat Evolved.

—Mike Weigand

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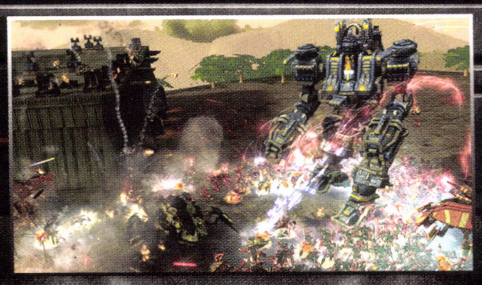

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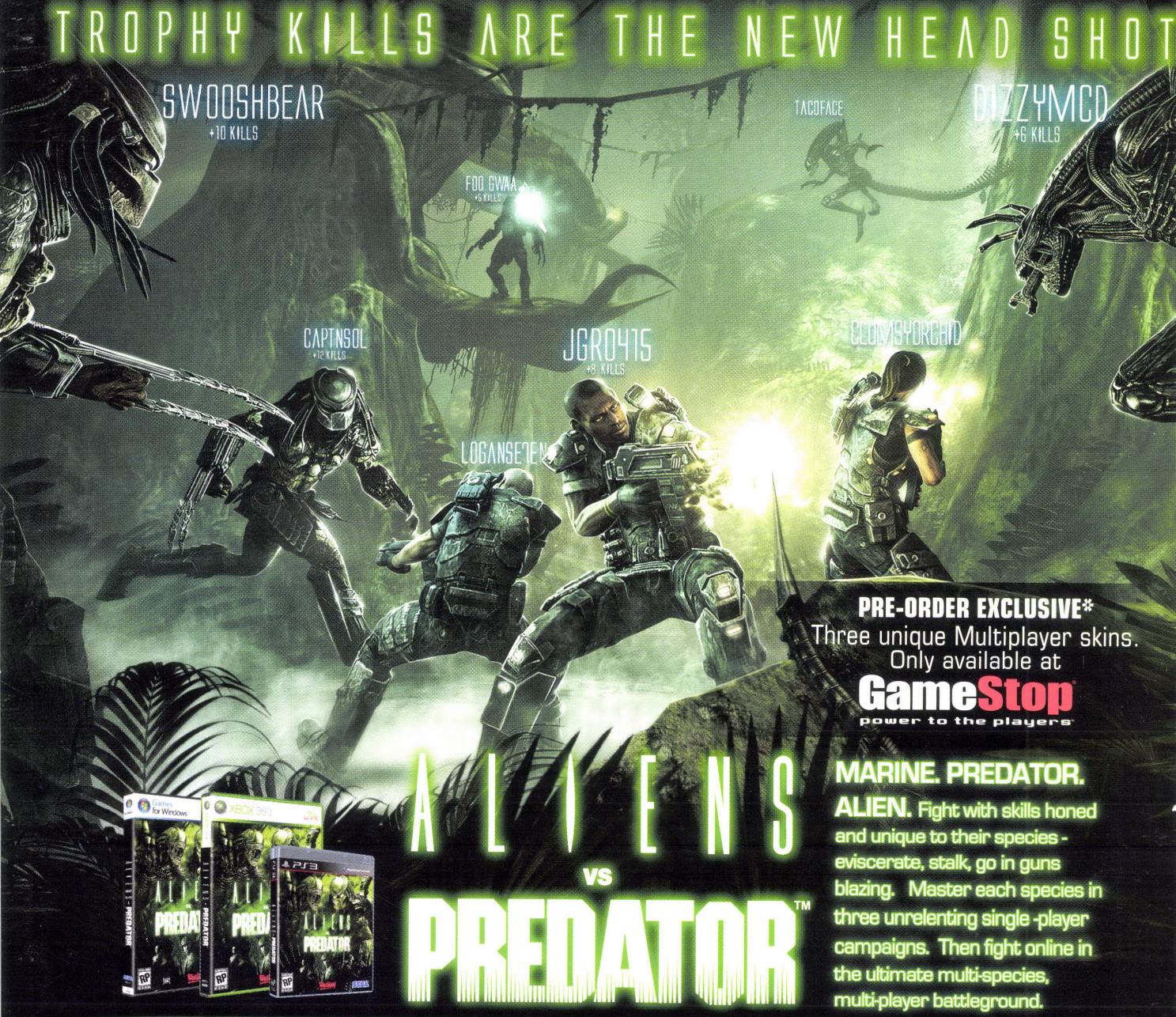

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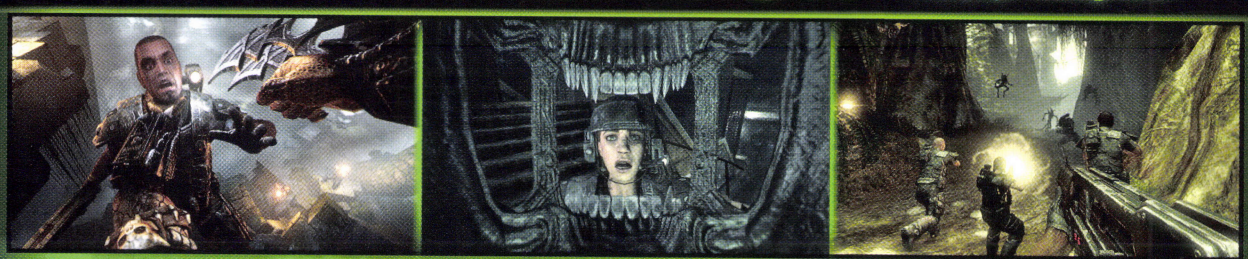

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